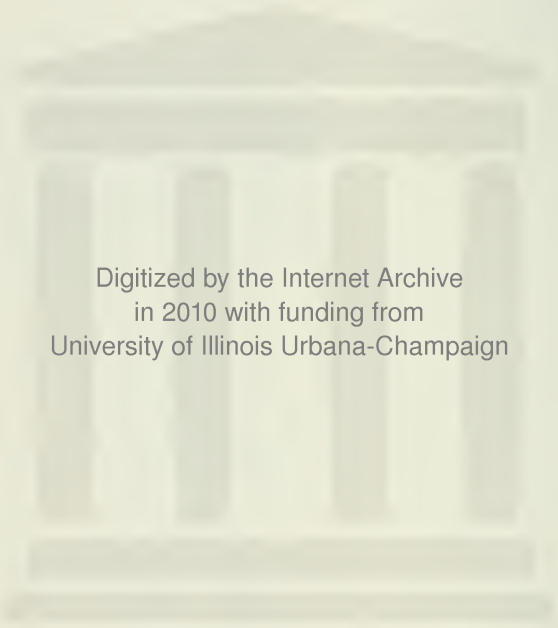


LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS

823
N894a
v. 2



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

THE AMUSEMENTS

OF

A MAN OF FASHION.



THE AMUSEMENTS
OF
A MAN OF FASHION.

A Novel.

BY
NORMAN NUGENT.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.
1873.

[All rights of Translation and Reproduction are reserved.]

LONDON :
SAVILL, EDWARDS AND CO., PRINTERS, CHANDOS STREET,
COVENT GARDEN.

823
N 894a
v. 2

CONTENTS

OF

THE SECOND VOLUME.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. THE TWO LOCKS OF HAIR	1
II. STRAWS ON THE SURFACE	10
III. WATCHING THROUGH THE NIGHT	18
IV. AT THE STUDIO	32
V. SIR FREDERICK MORTON MEETS LORD OXENTEN IN TOWN	45
VI. MARY MORTON'S CONFESSION	54
VII. MAGGIE NICHOLSON'S GRAVE	68
VIII. EDITH IN HER NEW HOME—A MYSTERIOUS SLIP OF PAPER :	87
IX. A GIRL WITHOUT A NAME	98
X. MARY MORTON GAINS A NEW INTEREST IN LIFE	121
XI. MARION AND MINNIE	134
XII. THE PROSPECTIVE MISTRESS OF THE GRANGE .	148

CHAP.	PAGE
XIII. AN UNEXPECTED DENOUEMENT	161
XIV. THE SOONER A DARK PAGE IS TURNED OVER THE BETTER	175
XV. A STRANGE VISITOR	188
XVI. THE AMUSEMENTS OF A MAN OF FASHION. .	199
XVII. MRS. LAWRENCE TOUCHES ON AN UNPLEASANT SUBJECT	223
XVIII. TELLS HOW JOHN LAWRENCE LISTENED TO A CONVERSATION NOT MEANT FOR HIM TO HEAR	231
XIX. THE VICAR OF F—— HAS A SUSPICION THAT IN PRACTISING KNIGHT-ERRANTRY HE HAS BURNT HIS OWN FINGERS . . .	242



THE AMUSEMENTS OF A MAN OF FASHION.

CHAPTER I.

THE TWO LOCKS OF HAIR.



FEW days after the occurrences noted in our last chapter, Sir Desborough Denton sat alone in a richly furnished London drawing-room. The gay Baronet had been rather serious since his late visit to the farm. How far this seriousness might be attributed to the awful circumstances by which that visit was so abruptly brought to a close, or to the dis-

appointment of an unlawful passion, we will not pretend to determine; but the slight touch of thoughtfulness or melancholy certainly suited him remarkably well. His mobile features—from the full, sensual lip, partly hidden by the dark moustache, to the daring eye, which, notwithstanding its roving character, was no stranger to a dangerous tenderness—seemed to borrow a fresh grace from each succeeding change of expression. He was turning over the contents of a large desk. Presently he lighted on a little white kid glove. The wearer must have had a delicate hand. Probably Sir Desborough thought so; for he held it up, and looked at it, while a strange smile crossed his countenance.

“Ha,” he soliloquized, “I could have married that girl, if she had only stood firm. ’Twas a blessing for me that she did not, though. Nothing short of madness,

such as I once felt for her, could induce me to put my neck into the holy noose of matrimony. By Jove, this glove might tell a tale! How lovely she was that day above all others, in her soft, agitated terror lest aught should be discovered! What strange creatures women are! yielding all to win all, and losing all by yielding. Well, I hope she may play her cards successfully. A few weeks now will decide it—he need never know until——” (again the sinister smile wreathed his lip). “And then I shall be abroad, and he—if he be a wise man, as I take him to be—will make the best of a bad job, and—forgive her. I like to meet her out: valse with her, feel the quiver in every nerve, as my arm encircles her waist; see her struggle for self-command—she does it bravely too. If I had been fool enough to marry her, I wonder how long those

pretty flutters would have lasted? I shall be glad when it is over, though I do not anticipate the result she chooses to fear. She is safe enough there. It would be almost worth the penalty of second-sight to know beforehand how he will bear the discovery. Some men would revenge themselves, and others go half mad. By-the-by I promised to destroy her letters, and had better do it at once, less for her sake than my own."

He laid down the glove, and, taking out several packets of papers, untied them, and glanced at the signature of each one separately.

Some he read over with a self-satisfied complacency; others he threw carelessly aside. One concluded by these remarkable words: "This may have made us one: but it has given you all, and me nothing." Another was blistered with tears. When

he had collected them all, he walked across the room, and placed them on the fire, watching their gradual disappearance with a secret satisfaction. This accomplished, he resumed his previous occupation.

The next thing that arrested his attention was a folded paper containing two locks of chestnut hair. They were very similar both in texture and shade ; but Sir Desborough instantly distinguished them, holding one up to the light, and leaving the other on the table.

“Strange that she should be living under his protection ! He seems fated to cross my path, and foil me at every turn. We shall be quits though in the future, if nothing should occur to set aside this marriage.” (There was something inexpressibly repellent in the smile that crossed his countenance, as he sat there alone, idly toying with the soft bright hair !) “She would

have made a nice companion for my Continental trip: all gentleness and tenderness as soon as I had succeeded in smoothing away her scruples. None of the stiff manlike character that must be broken ere it will bend, but all credulity and trustfulness, just the stuff that women should be made of, with no bones or sinews of their own. I owe him a grudge for spoiling my pleasure, and unless fate play me false, shall pay it right handsomely. I wish though —— had sent me back that locket! It might possibly fall into other hands as awkward evidence. A straw will sometimes turn the scale. Heigho! These love-gifts are very much alike, but the one has a charm which the other has lost. Let it go—there are more grapes in the vineyard.”

There was certainly a medley in that large old-fashioned desk. Packets of closely-written manuscript, scraps of old love-letters,

notes of invitation, and torn envelopes whence the enclosures had been carefully removed. More than a dozen portraits of women, many of them very beautiful; a variety of trinkets, rings, serpents biting their tails, doves, hearts, and anchors, all more or less emblematic of the sender's feelings. Locks of hair of almost every shade, from pale gold to deep chestnut or questionable auburn (Sir Desborough Denton had no fancy for dark beauties); one or two bunches of withered flowers, innumerable latchkeys, and (strange resting-place for a reminder of the dead!) tied up with a black ribbon, his father's last will and letter of advice, unread and unopened since the day of the funeral.

Having reduced the contents to some degree of order, Sir Desborough closed the desk, and began to pace restlessly up and down the room.

“I don’t like going without that girl,” he muttered. “The worst of it is, I am afraid to trust her with a letter, and one might as well put one’s head into the lion’s jaws at once as attempt anything while she remains where she is now. There is no help for it. I must wait for her; though it would be scarcely prudent for me to be in England when the crash comes, and come it must unless—— It is confoundedly hard! There are hundreds of women ready to fling themselves into one’s arms. Faugh! I am sick of them all. But this shy, coy beauty, trembling in the grasp of a real love (a rarity in these days), and withal so determined to be virtuous, why, there is something positively enchanting in the chase. I cannot give her up. Where a passionate woman is as yet unconscious of passion there is a something to mould, to conquer, to teach; instead of the *blasé*

feeling of finding everything ready to your hand."

He rang the bell impatiently. A footman entered.

"I shall not go to-day now, James. Not at home to any callers. You understand."

The man bowed low, with a significant gesture, and Sir Desborough was again left to himself.





CHAPTER II.

STRAWS ON THE SURFACE.

ON the afternoon of that day Marion Hayes was gazing listlessly from the windows of a large mansion in Belgravia, situated within a stone's-throw of Mrs. Elliot's London home. Edith and Marion had probably often crossed each other in their daily walk or drive. The patrician beauty and the portionless dependent had breathed the same air, traversed the same scenes, and were now again (to all appearance) inextricably involved in the same mysterious labyrinth of destiny.

Marion was evidently suffering from

ennui. The table near her, pushed back a little from the couch on which she was reclining, was strewn with books, fancy work, and drawings, each having been taken up in turn, and put down again as soon as begun. Her pet dog, "Tou-tou," happily unconscious of neglect, lay curled up on a cushion at her feet fast asleep. The piano was open. She had been trying the last new song, and thrown it aside after singing the first stanza. A close observer might have detected traces of tears on the delicately-lined eyelids, and there was a tremulousness about the mouth that betokened anything but a mind at ease. Presently the face lighted up. An expression that was neither joy nor sorrow, indignation nor surprise, came into the deep, lustrous brown eyes; as the fair head bent slightly in recognition of the marked salutation of two military men who were passing on the

opposite side of the street. They hesitated. One said something to the other, and arm in arm they came across directly in front of the house.

“Surely he is not going to call?” exclaimed Marion, starting from the couch. “Misery, I dare not deny myself. He has seen me, and I am in his power.”

With a repressed shudder the unhappy girl sank back into her former position. Her alarm, however, proved to be unfounded. The two friends had merely crossed the road to speak to Mr. Hayes. Marion took a book from the table and attempted to read. Her mind refused to grasp the meaning of the words; but it might give her the appearance of unconcern. In a few minutes her father came in unattended.

Bernardin Hayes was a tall gaunt man, with none of the external attributes of good breeding and high birth. He was said by

some to be exceedingly shy, and this shyness may have given an awkwardness to his general demeanour. Certain it is that he seldom looked any one straight in the face, and his small crafty eyes, almost incessantly seeking the ground, had in them a touch of fear or distrust that might be thought incompatible with his size and evident strength. His countenance, though not exactly ill-tempered, was far from prepossessing; but much ostentatious generosity, undoubtedly excellent dinner parties, and the reputation of enormous wealth, made him a great favourite with men of his own station. The ladies were not generally so favourably impressed; but whether this difference of opinion might be attributed to their superior discrimination or to the reverse, was an open question.

Perhaps the only being in the world for whom Bernardin Hayes cherished any feel-

ing of attachment was his beautiful and fascinating daughter, and, until within a month of her engagement to Sir Frederick Morton, this exclusive affection was fully reciprocated. Latterly a coolness had arisen between them: reproachful on the part of Marion, deprecatory on that of her father. The cause remained a mystery to all but themselves.

Marion rose to greet him, greatly relieved to find he was alone; but she endured rather than returned his caresses, and there was a lassitude or indifference in her manner which apparently she did not care to conceal.

“Alone, my darling? Where is Sir Frederick?”

“He is not coming. Poor Mary is ill again, and Lady Morton wants us to go down there instead. I had a letter from her this morning just after you left. There is one for you, too; see on the vase yonder.”

Bernardin broke the seal with a discontented air, muttering to himself, "They know I never visit." Then aloud—

"Do you care about my going, dear?"

"Just as you like, papa. I can do very well with Elise."

Mr. Hayes looked at the same time relieved and disappointed. Then with a sudden change of tone he exclaimed abruptly—

"From what Lady Morton says, this illness is likely to postpone your marriage. For how long, I wonder?"

"I cannot tell. Probably until Mary is well enough to be bridesmaid."

The voice, to ordinary perception, was unconstrained and calm. Marion stood in the shade, and Bernardin's eyes were, as usual, tracing the pattern of the carpet. He did not see the spasm that contracted those beautiful features, nor the sudden flush of anger that followed his inquiry.

“Well, it cannot be helped. I must try bribery once more. You know, my dear child, the danger of delaying the completion of your happiness. Sir Frederick is a rich man, and will, undoubtedly, make a very good husband. I want to see you settled before anything transpires. I should certainly advise you to go to Donnington to-morrow. Give the necessary orders. I will write to Lady Morton and tell her to expect you.”

With another furtive uneasy glance into vacancy, he shuffled out of the room.

As the door closed, Marion sprang impatiently from her seat.

“Why am I to suffer for his duplicity in scheming and cowardice in action? Why did he leave the deed half done, placing us both at a hireling’s mercy, and storing up, for me at least, unmitigated wretchedness? And this postponement of my marriage.

Does he suspect? No, it can hardly be that. Why did he ever tell me? I used to love him dearly. Now," and an expression almost akin to loathing swept over her face, "my heart is dried up. I cannot feel towards him kindly. I am but the tool of his fancy, the slave of his sin. I did not ask him for this wealth and grandeur. Beauty most assuredly he gave me not."

The full length mirror that reflected her commanding form gave back also the sarcastic bitterness of her smile.

The night came on cold and misty, damp and miserable, as November nights in London for the most part are.

There was darkness without and darkness within.



CHAPTER III.

WATCHING THROUGH THE NIGHT.



HEN Marion arrived at the Grange, she found Lady Morton waiting to receive her.

“My dear child, this is a sad disappointment to us all. It must be especially so to you. First, Frederick not being able to come to you in town; and now, I fear this is likely to prove but a melancholy visit.”

“How is Mary?” asked Marion, with real interest. Naturally amiable, she was by no means insensible to the virtues of the gentle invalid.

“Much the same. At times slightly de-

lirious. Dr. Mayhew seems to apprehend brain fever. Frederick will not leave her; he has been up nearly all night, only sleeping at intervals on a sofa. Will you dress first, and have some refreshment, or go to him now?"

"Go to him now," repeated Marion, mechanically. "Certainly."

She had taken off her bonnet and travelling cloak, and, holding her dress with her right hand, was unconsciously smoothing back her rich bands of chestnut hair with the left, on which glittered her betrothal ring.

It was an ominous device. A serpent emblem of Eternity holding a diamond heart, transfixed by an arrow, on which was engraven the word "Justice." It had once belonged to Lady Morton, whose name was "Justice Mary." Curiously enough the coincidence struck Marion with a sudden presentiment of evil.

“ You look pale, dear ; the excitement of the journey has been too much for you. You had better lie down a little while. Frederick does not know that you are here. I will tell him to come to you presently.”

“ Oh no. I would much rather go to him at once.”

Finding her determined, Lady Morton led the way.

When they entered the room, Sir Frederick was bending anxiously over the couch of his sister. Recognising Marion, he rose, and embraced her with more than his usual tenderness of manner. It was not the power of her beauty ; not the momentary thrill of feeling that this peerless creature was his own ; but the still small voice of conscience underlying the tide of self-reproach. He felt that he had done her an injustice.

Mary was asleep : a hectic flush on her cheek, contrasting strangely with the snow-

white forehead. Her dark hair, pushed back, left the rapid throbbing of the violet-veined temples plainly visible. Presently her lips moved, apparently under the influence of an unquiet dream. They might have framed a name; the sound was indistinct to Marion; but Sir Frederick started, as though a serpent had stung him.

“Come into the next room, dear; she sleeps; we can leave her for the present.”

Putting his arm round his betrothed, he stooped to kiss her forehead. Lover-like actions, words of endearment, might they atone?

A nurse who had been with Mary from her childhood took the vacant post of watcher. Sir Frederick’s whispered injunction, “Whatever she may say, take no notice; don’t speak of it to any one,” was scarcely needed.

“My poor darling,” murmured the old

woman, stroking the glossy curls that swept over the pillow ; “ little did I think this trial was in store ! Poor lamb, poor lamb ! Alack ! things are very different to what they used to be. It was an evil day that ever the young Earl come to the Grange.”

The Baronet was not looking well. The agony of mind he had undergone during his short absence ; his undisguised grief and alarm, to find his sister seriously ill from a cause which he no longer saw any reason to doubt ; Lady Morton’s evident uneasiness ; her indignant silence whenever Lord Oxent’s name was mentioned, showing that her suspicions came very near the truth—all these told severely on a proud and ardent temperament. He felt he had primarily himself to blame for all that had come to pass. His blind ambition in throwing the Earl so constantly in Mary’s society, and

his unexcusable folly in binding himself to a woman who had no hold, save on the sensuous part of his nature, were rightly punished; while his last interview with Edith, so far from soothing, embittered his remorse.

There were many anxious hearts in the Grange that afternoon and evening. Shall we glance at them, as, removed from the restraint of the family circle, they retired for the night?

Marion, Sir Frederick's last kiss still warm upon her cheek, sat leaning her head on her left hand, endeavouring to recollect. Her thoughts were all in a whirl. Could she have been so mad, so imprudent? One fatal infatuation ever weaving the web of falsehood closer; why could she not break the chain that enthralled her? Alas! its strength lay within. With trembling fingers she undid the fastenings of her dress, bared

her bosom, white as the cambric that shrouded its exquisite moulding; shook the folds of her long trained skirt; removed separately each outward article of clothing, and threw on a scarlet dressing wrapper that inconceivably heightened her disordered charms, while her foot beat impatiently on the carpet. Just then her eye rested on the motto of her engagement ring, "Justice." She muttered, "What if it should come, and through him?"

Elise knocked at the door, but she sent her away.

"Not to-night. You may go to bed. I shall not want you to-night."

Again she sought, and in vain.

Look at that face haggard through all its loveliness; those eyes, deep and lustrous, yet in the intensity of their gaze reflecting the image of a something wanting. Look once more ere we draw the curtain of

darkness around them ; but ask not of the lost link between angels and men.

Lady Morton's pride had been sorely chastened. Her successful scheming brought with it anxiety and sorrow, of which she had little dreamed, and for which she was very ill prepared. Her son, the hope of her declining years, was at last engaged and on the eve of marriage, as she had so long wished him to be, but—and the mother's heart failed her in the retrospect—he had evidently known no happiness since his journey to London in the spring, April 14th, and this was the close of November. For seven months a cloud had hung over the Grange, which not even the festive preparations of the preceding weeks could entirely dispel. And now a new blow had fallen, almost the heaviest that could fall on her hereditary pride. Her daughter, brought up under her own immediate supervision,

educated by the strictest rules of maidenly modesty and womanly reserve, stood convicted of what, in Lady Morton's estimation, constituted the greatest of feminine sins—that of bestowing the wealth of her virgin affection on one who, as inferred by the result, had never even thought of soliciting the favour. No wonder that the strife between her pity for the offender and her indignation at the offence drove her well-nigh distracted, and made her the more willingly resign the post of watcher to the deeply-feeling and compassionate brother, whose less severe judgment was tempered by the personal experience of a similar trial.

“Go and lie down, Elsted,” said Sir Frederick to the old nurse as he entered the sick-room. “You will be quite worn out, and I should not like any of the other servants to wait upon my sister. Go and lie down, I will take turns with you to-night.”

Left alone with the invalid his thoughts were none of the most peaceful.

“A hard recompense this for my long friendship,” he soliloquized. “I have reasoned calmly and dispassionately. “I have tried to make excuses for him, excuses that went against my own consciousness of right. Did I not treat him as a brother? I will not believe it possible that she alone should be to blame. If he knew of it (and that at least I shall ascertain some day) he was culpably weak in not shunning her society. My poor little sister!—if she dies” (a sudden moisture came into the stern grey eyes) “he had better not cross my path. God help me! what am I saying? He is less guilty than I. Edith Moorfield had no protector.”

He sat down, shading the lamp from the invalid's couch, his face turned towards her in the shade. In this position, seen in the

imperfect light, the features of the brother and sister seemed strangely alike. His the strong reality, hers the spiritualized counterpart, and the shadow resting on both.

One other picture and we have done.

Minnie Brooks was sitting up unusually late that evening. Mrs. Latham, the housekeeper, not feeling very well, had gone to bed early, leaving the keys in her young friend's charge. When her last nominal duty was fulfilled, Minnie went to her room, but for a long time made no attempt to undress. She had greatly altered since her grandfather's death. The fearfully trying scene which preceded her immediate knowledge of bereavement had shattered her nerves and impaired her health. Her smile was so melancholy that, as Lady Morton said, it made one sad to look at her. She appeared to be living in a state of constant apprehensiveness, and nothing would induce

her to go outside the house alone. Gentle, quiet, and unobtrusive, she had readily won the pitying regard of Sir Frederick's numerous retainers, while her obviously forlorn condition prevented her extraordinary timidity becoming the subject of ridicule and remark. Of the Baronet himself she had seen but little since she became an inmate of the Grange. Having placed her under the care of his mother, he inquired no further; and although his solicitude for the welfare of his interesting protégée was by no means diminished, he was too thoroughly a man of the world to expose himself to censure. Minnie might have been happy if she could have forgotten the past; but forgetfulness is too frequently a word without a meaning, and the very expression "driving away thought" too plainly implies that it is still before us. There were painful memories that would not be driven from their

resting-place; scorching memories of impassioned pleadings, harder, perhaps, to bear because the innocent child-heart had been so grievously torn in the effort to withstand them. Often in the lonely night would she start from her slumbers, imagining she felt the pressure of his arm thrown round her, his passionate kiss on her lips; and in her dreams it seemed that she was yielding; that she clung more closely to his embrace, instead of repulsing him with horror. Again, in her fevered imagination, she was lying on his breast, his hot breath fanning her cheek; and again, with a wild sob of agony, she would call on her grandfather's name.

Poor Minnie, she had paid very dearly for her trusting credulity. Now, as she sat leaning over her little dressing-table with something tightly clasped in her hand, the reminiscences of that terrible past rose up

bodily before her, and there was a nameless dread in the startled glance and colourless lip as she murmured to herself—

“Whose is it? What does it mean?
How came it here?”





CHAPTER IV.

AT THE STUDIO.

MOLYNEUX TEMPLE was fairly bewildered. The threads of an almost incredible romance, which extended over a space of more than twenty years, were in his hands, with but one or two links wanting. To say that he was in any hurry to piece out the missing passages and make the chain of evidence complete, would be incorrect—in fact, he rather shrank from doing so. The whole affair had been thrust upon him without any seeking or inclination of his own, and yet, impelled by a species of fascination, he felt he must go through with it.

While he sat alone in his chambers pondering over the occurrences of the previous fortnight there was a knock at the door, and a respectably-dressed woman, apparently about sixty years of age, was ushered into the room, curtseying low, as the young lawyer rose to offer her a chair.

“Good morning, Mrs. Nicholson. I was just thinking of your case. There is one page in the history still incomplete, and which I honestly see no means of supplying unless you are able to assist me.”

“What is that, sir?”

“The name and subsequent whereabouts of the people who lived, or were supposed to live, in the old house at the foot of Holborn Hill.”

“Money will do all things,” muttered Mrs. Nicholson in an undertone. Then aloud—

“Well, sir, I think the information you

require can be laid before you in a few days. I will see about it at once."

"In a few days," ejaculated the lawyer, as, without another word, his client conveyed herself away with a noiseless cat-like movement. "And I imagined I had given her employment for a month! A dangerous woman, crafty, unscrupulous, and determined. I wish to heaven she had thought of applying to somebody else, instead of setting me to pull my friends' houses down about their ears! Yet, perhaps it is as well. I may be able to spare them some pain, which others would not even take the trouble to consider. What can be her motive in this act of single-handed justice? Not that which lies on the surface, I'll warrant. Heigho! This life is a mystery."

The same morning between twelve and one o'clock, Lenham called at a picture shop in Regent Street, to speak about a

likeness that he had recently ordered, intending to present it to his mother as a birthday gift. He was shown into a large upper room, surrounded by the portraits of various members of the royal family, and the most distinguished personages of the day. In the centre of the apartment was a table, also covered with likenesses; and at the farther end, behind a sort of counter, talking to a lady, stood a quiet, gentlemanlike-looking man, whom Lenham at once recognised as the master of the studio. The lady with whom he was conversing was tall and slight. Lenham could not see her face, but there was nothing remarkable in her appearance beyond the exquisite neatness of her dress.

Molyneux Temple had arranged to go out with him, and they were to meet at the studio. It wanted little more than a minute to the time of the appointment. There was

no help for it, his business must wait. He could not resolve to interrupt the speakers, so lingered in the background, amusing himself by glancing over the pictures. An involuntary exclamation escaped him as—lying on the table, distinguished from the others by its superior size—he observed a singularly good likeness of his friend Morton. While he was attentively considering the countenance, and musing on the various changes in the character and fate of the original, he was startled by the sound of a suppressed sigh. Turning, he saw the lady

whom he had previously noticed. He now perceived that she was young and very beautiful; but it was not her beauty which arrested his attention, it was the strange sorrowful intentness of her gaze, directed—ah! he could not be mistaken—to the portrait of Sir Frederick.

“A good likeness, is it not?” said the

artist. "It was done for Lady Morton by a great friend of mine; and, I have reason to believe, is intended as a wedding present to her son's bride."

Before Lenham could reply, Molyneux Temple appeared in the doorway.

"So there you are!" He paused and hesitated, raising his hat, as he made room for the stranger, with that spontaneous homage which a woman's loveliness always, more or less, excites in the minds of the young and ardent.

"What a splendid creature! Who is she? Do you know her, Lenham?"

"No. I was about to ask a similar question."

"I am sorry I cannot give you any definite information, gentlemen," said the master of the studio. "She is evidently a lady in reduced circumstances. Her name, I am told, is Field, but it is most probably

assumed. In such cases, one never knows for a certainty. Perhaps you would like to look at her drawings?"

Both the young men eagerly assented. The painter opened a small portfolio and placed it before them. The sketches it contained were mostly unpretending landscapes, but they evinced something more than ordinary talent, and unconsciously conveyed the impression of innate taste and refinement. Sadness was their prevailing characteristic. One instinctively felt that the artist was unhappy.

"Are these drawings for sale?" asked Temple, after a pause.

"They are. I was directed to put my own price on them, or let them go for whatever they would fetch. Really, though, I have not yet thought about it. Poor young lady," continued the adroit and kind-hearted painter, keenly alive to the interest

of his auditors; "I did not like to say anything to discourage her."

The two friends exchanged glances, and Lenham took out a five-pound note.

"Let us have six. Give that to Miss ——"

"Field," said the portrait painter.

"Give that to Miss Field, and tell her we shall be happy to——"

"Recommend her," suggested Temple, slyly.

"Be of use to her in any way," said Lenham, completing the sentence. "Is my picture ready?"

"No, sir. It shall be sent to you tomorrow."

"All right. Good morning."

They were scarcely outside the house than Molyneux Temple, drawing his arm through his friend's, burst into an immoderate fit of laughter.

"What a fool you are!" ejaculated Lenham, half-angrily, shaking himself free.

"Thank you. What do you intend to do with those drawings?"

"Give them to my mother."

"Not all. Come, that's not fair. Some of them are mine," interposed Temple, taking out his purse. At that moment they were jostled by a crowd collected in front of the Circus, where an unfortunate cab-horse had just gone down. There was a wrench from behind, followed by an exclamation from Temple, that made his friend look round.

"What is it?"

"My purse."

"Stolen? No."

"It is though, by Jove! I had it in my hand a minute ago, intending to give you the change, and now it is gone."

"Was there much in it?"

"Something under five pounds. I had some notes—luckily they are safe in my

waistcoat pocket. Well, it cannot be helped."

"Shall we go to the police-court?"

"What would be the good of it? No, they pester one to death, and I cannot give evidence. I saw nothing, only felt a snatch at my wrist."

In that purse was a slip of paper which Molyneux Temple had forgotten.

Somewhat sobered by the adventure the two friends walked on, quietly talking over their visit to the studio, and speculating as to the probable misfortunes of the beautiful unknown. But the keynote of interest Lenham kept to himself. What possible connexion could there be between that poor, apparently friendless girl, and the generous, high-minded Morton? There was but one intelligible solution, and that he was pre-determined not to believe. Finding that reflection only puzzled him more, he at

length gave up trying to solve the enigma. It was on the cards that time might reveal the mystery (if mystery there were) relating to Miss Field. He stored up the name in his memory, to serve on some future occasion, and then resolutely turned his thoughts into another channel.

Molyneux Temple was not quite so successful in driving away perplexing reminiscences. Mrs. Nicholson's assurance that the required information would be shortly forthcoming was uncomfortably present to his mind. He must act then ; there would be no longer any reasonable excuse for delay. He must either comply with her request, and bring matters to a crisis, or place the whole affair in the hands of a less scrupulous legal adviser. And this he could not resolve to do. His professional pride was touched. Come what might, he would at all events go through with it.

“Surely that is Oxenten’s crest!” exclaimed Lenham, looking narrowly at the panels of a handsome dark green travelling equipage, drawn by a pair of greys, which passed them as they were returning through Pall Mall.

“I think not. I know he wrote to Morton, not long since, asking him to arrange some business matters with his agent, which he would hardly have done if he meant to come over himself.”

“Nevertheless, I am persuaded that is his turn-out. I remember the old gentleman buying it just before his death. Are you tired? If not, as I have to leave a card at the Greys, we might make a *détour*, and find out.”

Molyneux Temple laughed, but consented. Lenham’s curiosity was painfully excited. He had that morning received a letter from Sir Frederick, incidentally mentioning poor

Mary's illness; and he, not unnaturally, imagined that the Earl's unexpected return might have had something to do with it. When they reached Eaton Square, Lenham took out a card, and rang. The door was opened by a grey-haired footman, whom both the young men recollected to have seen before.

"Is Lord Oxenten in town?"

"His lordship has only just arrived, sir. I don't think he can see any visitors."

"It does not signify. Give him that card. He is well, I hope!"

"His lordship is as well as can be expected," replied the man, with marked hesitation.

Lenham was about to make farther inquiry, when he was stopped by a sign from Temple.

"Don't let Carvell's news transpire through me," he whispered. "I ought not to have mentioned it."



CHAPTER V.

SIR FREDERICK MORTON MEETS LORD OXENTEN IN TOWN.

IN order to explain the presence of Lord Oxenten in London, we must briefly relate what followed the scene at Lucia's grave. A severe cold, combined with protracted mental agony, brought about a serious illness. Medical aid was again called in, and for some time the result seemed doubtful. But the Earl's naturally good constitution pulled him through. When he had recovered sufficiently to be able to travel, Dr. Carvell recommended immediate change of air and scene. The sea-

son that year was unusually mild; and after mature deliberation, the young nobleman resolved to return to England, taking his child with him.

The business letter, written to Sir Frederick soon after Lucia's death, had been unaccountably delayed, so that it did not reach the Grange till within a fortnight of the date to which we refer.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. The Earl sat alone in the back drawing-room, and the folding-doors were shut. Presently there was a ring; the next moment steps were heard without, and a servant entered, bearing a card.

"I thought I gave orders to admit no callers?"

"Sir Frederick Morton, my lord."

"Ha! show him in."

It was scarcely possible to believe that six months could have wrought so great a

change in Lord Oxenten's appearance. There were deep lines on the once smooth forehead; and the streaks of silver underlying the thick masses of raven hair were distinctly visible; though the slight form was still erect and haughty, and the eyes preternaturally bright. Sir Frederick also looked pale and haggard; but there was a suppressed irritation about the corners of the mouth, which would prevent the alteration in his countenance being attributed to sorrow or fatigue.

He had only that morning received a note from Lord Oxenten, desiring his presence in town. Mary Morton's illness had assumed a dangerous phase. The physicians in attendance shook their heads, and suggested higher consultation. Humanly speaking, there appeared to be no hope. The Baronet's anger was exasperated to the highest point against his former favourite when he was

so inopportunately asked to meet him. He had accidentally discovered a letter addressed to his sister in the Earl's handwriting, and although from a nice sense of honour he had hitherto refrained from reading it, he was a prey to the most bitter grief and indignation. As may be imagined, he lost no time in obeying the summons. In less than half-an-hour he was on his way to London. Selfishly engrossed, as most of us are by individual sorrow, the thought of the supposed offender's subsequent suffering escaped his recollection, and the death of the Countess had not yet transpired. Lord Oxenten could not force himself to write on such a subject. He left all to a personal interview, and perhaps anticipated a melancholy consolation, in pouring out the story of his bereavement to one who had known and sympathized with him from childhood.

The Earl was, at first, too much overcome to notice Sir Frederick's reserve.

"Dear Morton, this is indeed kind of you. You can scarcely have had time to read my letter."

The absence of all warmth, the cruel silence of one in general so cordial, aroused his slumbering perception.

"What is the matter? What has happened? Lady Morton? Your sister?"

Now was the time. All the passionate reproach that had swelled the Baronet's heart almost to bursting conveyed itself in a few brief words.

"Lady Morton is well. My sister," the word almost choked him, and for a moment he could not go on, "Mary is dying. Lord Oxenten, do you know why?"

Hard, stern, pitiless, he had waited for this. Now he would know.

The Earl started violently and then turned

deadly pale, grasping the table for support, whilst Sir Frederick, with a bitter self-congratulation, stood watching the effect of his words.

“No! no! Morton, do not tell me this! Oh, God! have I not endured enough? Were two victims needed?”

The last sentence was inaudible. He sat down, covering his face with his hands.

“My lord, I am answered.”

“Morton,” said the young nobleman after a short silence, during which Sir Frederick’s dark eyebrows almost met in their heavy frown, “you wrong me cruelly. I cannot pretend to be entirely ignorant of this unfortunate attachment, but I knew nothing of it till the day I left your house. I own appearances are against me, and yet I am guiltless. I swear it!” he added, passionately, catching the Baronet’s look of incredulity, “I swear it! Why should you not believe me?”

Why? Because the demon of distrust had entered his heart, and he sought not to drive him away.

Lord Oxenten glanced irresolutely round the room, but his better nature came to his aid, and murmuring, "It is cowardly to clear oneself at the expense of another," he again turned to the Baronet with a tone of entreaty.

"Morton, I pledge you my honour. Will you not believe me?"

"It is hard to believe against the evidence of one's senses. Why were you always with her? Why did you show so marked a preference for her society?"

"Why? Because I had a friendship for her. Because I loved and looked upon her as a sister."

"A dangerous intimacy. The world refuses to recognise adopted brothers, and, in most instances, it is right."

“Morton, you did not know that—that——” He broke down, unable as yet to speak about Lucia.

“That you were secretly married? True, my lord; but I know it now, and you must pardon me for saying I do not consider that fact renders your conduct one whit less culpable.”

There was a momentary pause, and then Sir Frederick went on, while an angry flush rose to his brow.

“You assert that you knew nothing of it until the day you left our house. What am I to understand by that? Do you mean to insinuate——”

“I insinuate nothing,” returned Lord Oxenten, briefly and coldly, for he was deeply wounded; “I leave it to One who is just to judge me.”

His heart bled for the suffering of which he had been the unwilling and at first

unconscious cause; but harshness of any kind is a barrier to sympathy.

There was yet another shaft in the quiver.

“What would Lady Oxenten think if——”

“Do not mention that name,” thundered the Earl, trembling with agitation, while his lips became perfectly white. In a moment the truth flashed across Sir Frederick’s mind, as he caught sight of a mourning ring and a small circlet of gold which Lord Oxenten wore on the fourth finger of his left hand. A sudden revolution of feeling, strong as it was sudden, changed the whole current of his thoughts.

“My poor friend, I did not know. I would not have spoken thus to you in your great sorrow.”



CHAPTER VI.

MARY MORTON'S CONFESSION.

SIR FREDERICK did not arrive at the Grange till long past midnight. Just then Mary was asleep; so giving orders that he should be called in a moment if any change took place, after a hasty greeting to his mother, he endeavoured to obtain a few hours' repose.

The attempt was not very successful. His interview with the Earl harassed without satisfying him; and although in pity to his friend's desolate and bereaved condition he forbore any farther questioning, to his own mind he was as distant as ever from the required explanation.

The mystery was destined to be solved in a way that he little anticipated.

The next morning, as soon as she was awake, Mary sent for him. She was sitting up in bed, supported by pillows, Lady Morton at her side, holding one of the thin, wasted hands.

A faint smile brightened the invalid's face, as she said pleadingly—

“Let me have Frederick to myself, dear mother.”

Lady Morton sighed, and withdrew.

“Now, come closer ; put your arm round me.” Her head sank wearily on his shoulder, he bending over her, till his face rested upon hers. “I want to talk to you so much. *You* love me, my own brother?”

Sir Frederick understood the emphasis on that one word too well, but he could only answer by caresses.

“It seems as if I had been dreaming; as if I had been away in some strange place, and had said things that——”

Her breath came quick and short, and the Baronet's heart was beating faster than its wont. He had to steady his voice ere he replied—

“Yes, dear, you have said things—things you would not have said had you been conscious, and which have grieved me deeply.”

Mary was silent for awhile; then a thought of terror seemed to strike her, and she almost started from his encircling arm.

“Where did you go yesterday?”

“Do not agitate yourself by asking questions now, dear child,” returned Sir Frederick, alarmed at her wild looks. “I will tell you all about it when you are stronger.”

“But I shall never be stronger. I *must* know. I had such a terrible dream last night. I only am to blame. I must make matters right before I go.”

The Baronet did not reply. He was afraid to tell her the whole truth, and unable to frame an answer on the spur of the moment.

“You went to London to meet Lord Oxenten?”

Scarcely knowing what he was about, the words “I did,” fell from his lips before he was well aware of their import.

“Oh, God! My dream—my dream! And I alone to blame! You have not hurt him, Fred? He is safe? You have not killed him?”

“Mary, you seem to forget I am a Christian,” said the Baronet, sadly and reproachfully.

“Then he is safe?”

“He is.”

“I dreamt last night that he was standing by a new-made grave, and you came to him in anger. You will hate me, despise me.”

There was no answer. Sir Frederick was an exceedingly proud man, and could ill brook humiliation through his nearest and dearest.

“Oh, Fred! don’t be harsh to me,” exclaimed poor Mary, with a sob that shook her whole frame. “Don’t take away your love—your love, the only comfort I have left!”

It was a sharp struggle, but affection conquered. The brother’s heart was touched. His head bent down to its original position, resting lightly on her cheek.

“I shall always love you, Mary, whatever you may have done.”

Sir Frederick was keenly affectionate, but

he did not know what to anticipate, and was almost driven wild by the thought of probable contingencies. In any case disappointment awaited him, either in his sister or his friend, and possibly in both.

Hiding her flushed and tearful countenance on his breast, Mary began her trying confession. To a pure and highly sensitive nature an unrequited attachment will too often appear a positive sin. It was a severe penance; a sense of shame humbled her to the dust, nor did she once look up till it was over. Only now and then, in the pauses of her sorrowful story, came the agonized pleading for sympathy. "Closer, my own brother. Pity me, love me." And although he spoke not, his strong, firm pressure answered the appeal.

"You remember when he was last here, soon after my eighteenth birthday? I had not seen him much before, I was kept so

strictly to the schoolroom. At that time my education was supposed to be completed, and as you know, dear Fred, we were constantly together. One evening (we had been out riding that day, and I recollect thinking he was unusually silent and depressed) he asked me to come out into the garden. We had other visitors. I forget who they were. But he said he had a headache, and wanted some one to whom he could talk quietly alone. We walked on till we came to the arbour at the end of the filbert grove; and then he told me everything about himself, how he had never known his mother, and never had a sister of his own; that his father was by nature too proud and haughty to show affection to his child; that he had nobody to speak to when at home; that he was very, very unhappy, and could not tell any one the reason. I saw the tears in his eyes.

He did not turn away to hide them, but asked me to pity him, and be to him a sister; and I promised, for I did not then perceive the danger. No one came near us. We sat there talking nearly an hour. He said it was a comfort to him, and I had not the heart to go away.

“From that day I began to love him, unconsciously at first. I thought it merely sisterly affection, and never dreamed of striving against it until it was too late.

“I could not speak of what had passed between us, feeling instinctively that the charm would be broken. Besides, it was all too sacred. Time passed on. Day after day, and week after week, we rode, walked, played, or sang together, until it seemed as if our lives were one. I never thought of the future. I only asked to be allowed

to love him, to know there was a bond of sympathy between us, to feel the lingering pressure of his hand, to hear him call me, when we were alone, 'his sister.'

"Often when he had been out shooting with you, and the time for his return drew near, long before he approached the house, I used to feel him coming, and was obliged to run away to my own room, till the paroxysm of excitement had gone by. Wild thoughts came into my mind; I worshipped the very ground on which he trod: waking or sleeping, I had but one idea. His name was ever on my lips; the first in the morning and the last at night. My dreams were always of him. His hand seemed to be resting on my heart, happiness akin to suffering in its touch. I could not pray for its removal. I only longed to die while he was near me; for I loved him more

than myself, and more than my God. One day there came a summons from his father. The preceding week I had made a little sketch to keep as a memento of one who had become the whole world to me. The prospect of his departure struck me to the earth. The Earl's letter came about half-past nine; and immediately after breakfast I went out into the wilderness, carrying my journal and the likeness in my hand. I sat down on the trunk of an old tree, in the most lonely spot I could find; and then the full bitterness of my great grief rushed upon me in a moment. I knew before that sooner or later it must come. It was not disappointment that crushed me; but I had an impression that he would not return. I wanted to die, and suppose I must have said so aloud; for the last word was repeated by a voice that I recognised too well.

Lord Dunorven had been searching for me, not wishing to say good-bye before the others. I started up, endeavouring to escape ; but my foot slipped, and I should have fallen had he not caught me by the hand. He made me sit down again ; called me his sister, and entreated me to tell him the cause of my distress. He never thought of anything connected with himself. I know that now to him my madness and misery were utterly incomprehensible. His questioning drove me distracted. I knelt down by the tree, and silently prayed to die—anything rather than betray myself. In my agitation, the book and drawings must have fallen to the ground ; I suppose he saw the likeness, for I heard him sigh heavily, and then there came indistinct words of self-reproach. He blamed himself entirely, and said things which I did not understand at the time,

but which I now know must have had some reference to his secret marriage. At last I grew more calm, rose from my knees, and tried to look him in the face. That look recalled me to myself. Whatever I may have suffered at that moment, he did not suffer less. He did not say much. We walked home together; no one passed us, and we got in unobserved. At the foot of the stairs we parted, and his last words were: 'Can you ever forgive me?' He went to his room and I to mine. I did not come down again before he started. At the beginning of our acquaintance he had written to me about some poor people in whom he felt an interest."

"Ha!" The Baronet's colour came and went. Mary did not appear to heed the interruption.

"That little note—it was only a few lines

—was my one great treasure, all I had left to remind me of him. He went abroad, and I seldom heard his name till that morning in September when Mr. Temple told us he was married. Then, indeed, I felt that my loving him was sin ; and the misery of fruitlessly striving to overcome what I knew to be wrong was too much for me. I was determined to conquer it ; I shall do so even now. It will not be sin to love like the angels.”

The confession was over, the story told ; the suffering, keen and bitter as it was, lightened by being transferred from the one heart to the other.

There was a long silence, and then Sir Frederick said, gently—

“ Mary, poor Lady Oxenten is dead.”

“ Dead ? How sad, how very sad for him ! Is she dead, so young, so beautiful, and so beloved ? And I am going soon ;

it cannot be very long now. I wonder if we shall know and love one another in heaven?"

Earth found no answer.





CHAPTER VII.

MAGGIE NICHOLSON'S GRAVE.



ORD OXENTEN did not remain long in London. The next day he and his young heir went down to the Castle, where an enthusiastic welcome awaited them from the villagers and tenantry. The Earl endured rather than reciprocated the general manifestation of delight; it too painfully recalled the pleasure he had once anticipated in bringing Lucia to her English home; and it was a relief to his mind when, the first rush of excitement over, he felt himself at liberty to fall back into a solitary life, only varied by occasional visits from the Rector.

Mr. Seagraves cherished an almost parental affection for the young nobleman, and deeply lamented the state of despondency into which he had been plunged by the death of the Countess. Time alone would permanently soften the trial; but a little friendly intercourse might do much towards removing the injurious monotony of one thought; and so whenever he could find an available excuse, the good man went up to the Castle, endeavouring to draw his reserved parishioner into some matter of local or charitable interest.

On the Sunday following Lord Oxenten's arrival, all the inhabitants of the village were in a state of expectation. Old and young thronged the church, hoping to obtain a passing glimpse of one who, as known to them in boyhood, had been universally beloved. Would he come or not?

Before the service commenced there was

a slight movement in the large curtained pew; but it was not until the sermon was over and the congregation prepared to disperse, that suspense became certainty, and they who had taken the precaution to stand near the Castle entrance were rewarded by seeing the Earl appear, unattended, dressed in the deepest mourning. He raised his hat with a faint smile, but did not speak till he caught sight of a tall dark man who was standing by the churchyard gate.

“Ha, Walter! how are you? How is your mother?”

The individual addressed made some indistinct reply. He had been scanning Lord Oxenten’s countenance with a kind of hungry curiosity; and apparently satisfied with the result of the investigation, drew a long breath as he fell back into the ranks, muttering in an undertone, “He has suffered more than I.”

It was the Earl's foster-brother, Walter Ealing.

Lord Oxenten was born in Kent. The unfortunate Countess must have had a presentiment of her approaching end, for some time before the birth of her son, she selected the wife of a small farmer in the neighbourhood as the one whom she wished (in event of her own removal) to fulfil the first necessary maternal duties. Lady Oxenten and Annette Ealing had each been married exactly a year, and, by a strange coincidence, their children were born on the same day, but the bells that rang out a joyous welcome to the infant heir were soon muffled in announcement of the young mother's death. According to her own request, the remains of the deceased lady were buried in the enclosure of the village church where she had last attended; and, perhaps unwilling to linger in a spot which to his cold nature

was hallowed neither by association nor regret, the Earl resolved to return to the Castle, taking with him the foster-mother and her family.

Annette Ealing and her husband were located in a pretty little farm, on the Oxent estate, where, in less than a year, the latter leaving to his widow the sole care and maintenance of an orphan boy, now in the prime of early manhood.

Walter waited till all the others were out of sight, and then, crossing the churchyard, went up to a low, turfed grave, marked by a neat white headstone, with a name and date which had evidently been very recently engraved :—

Margaret Nicholson,

Died August 29th, 18—,

Aged 21.

“My poor Maggie,” murmured Walter,
“we were to be married this time next

winter. Only three months gone, and now who cares for you—who misses you but me? A short life; a bright life until that fatal birthday. I wonder if it really began then? Poor darling! I seem to see her still—leading off the dance with the young lord—so beautiful, so proud of his notice. Oh, Maggie, Maggie!”

He plucked a few blades of grass from the grave, and laid them tenderly on his breast.

The next day, at noon, Lord Oxenten went down to the church, ostensibly to inspect the late Earl's monument, in reality (only he felt that he could not speak of it to any one) to decide on some suitable memorial of his love for Lucia. After remaining nearly half an hour he came out, resigned the keys to the old clerk, and walked slowly through the churchyard. Suddenly

his gaze rested on the newly-erected headstone; the name caught his eye, and an expression of great pain swept across his countenance.

“Margaret Nicholson! She is gone then. Poor girl! poor child! I am glad now that I did not leave her note unanswered.”

He stood still for a moment, to read the date and age. Just then the Rector came up.

After the customary greeting, Mr. Seagraves observed—

“You were looking at Margaret Nicholson’s grave. Hers is a sad story.”

Lord Oxenten started, but recovering himself instantly, quietly rejoined—

“I can imagine an early death must always seem more or less sad to the survivors.”

“True. However, to my thinking hers

was particularly so. She was the prettiest girl in the village. Surely, you remember her?"

"Oh, perfectly."

"Do you recollect choosing her for your partner at the ball given to the servants and tenantry when you came of age?"

"Yes. I recollect the circumstance, now that you mention it," replied the Earl, in a constrained voice. "Morton danced with her afterwards."

Mr. Seagraves's forehead contracted in an ominous frown. The Baronet's name brought with it unpleasant reminiscences.

"There was always something strange about the Nicholsons. I may as well go back to the beginning. Shall I? You used to be fond of hearing stories from life."

"Ay, do."

"I will walk home with you then, and

have a look at your boy—my pupil that is to be,” added the reverend gentleman, glancing affectionately at the young nobleman’s half-averted face. “To resume. There always seemed to be something strange about the Nicholsons. Two and twenty years ago, the grandmother of the girl who lies yonder came to live in this village. She was then a widow, with one daughter, a pretty girl of eighteen. Mrs. Nicholson never attempted to cultivate any friendly intercourse with her neighbours, and invariably repulsed those among them whose blunt good-nature or officious curiosity prompted them to pass the limits assigned by her reserve. Poverty had nothing whatever to do with her secluded style of living, for both she and her daughter fared well, and dressed well, as their occasional appearance at church and the books of the tradesmen sufficiently testified.

“The cause remained a secret, and as uneducated people (educated too sometimes) are naturally inclined to imagine harm of those whom they cannot understand, Mrs. Nicholson and her daughter did not bear a good name, although no one was prepared to state the reason. I had no opportunity of forming an opinion, till one evening in December, when I was sent for in a hurry, Mrs. Nicholson met me at the door of the cottage, begging me to be speedy and silent. There was a look of grief and indignation on her usually impassible countenance that I had never seen there before, and no wonder. I was ushered into an inner room where, to all appearance, Hester—yes, I think her name was Hester—lay dying, and at her side a wailing infant. As you may imagine, I was inexpressibly shocked. Poor girl, there was no wedding-ring on her finger. She caught my glance

of inquiry, and whispered in a voice broken by sobs, 'Pity me, don't despise me. I am not married, but you will baptize my child.' There was no time to lose. She lived just long enough to witness the ceremony, joining in prayer with her last breath. On leaving the room I addressed a few words of sympathy to the bereaved mother. She is not a woman in whom I could feel any lasting interest, but I must own I pitied her then. She did not know the name of her daughter's seducer, and her wild grief and threats of vengeance, should discovery ever place it in her power, were terrible to hear.

"It seems the girl had concealed her misfortune to the last, and resisted every entreaty to reveal her secret. Poor thing! Hers is an everyday story. Ruined in the name of love, and blindly worshipping the cause. Years passed. The child grew

up to womanhood, gifted far beyond her station both in mind and person. She was passionately fond of reading, and soon outstripped all her competitors in the village school. The first time I remember being particularly struck by her beauty was at that very ball given by the late Earl on your attaining your majority. Another was struck by it too—Walter Ealing.”

“I never heard that.”

“Nor did I till long afterwards. For some years Walter’s suit did not appear likely to prosper. Maggie certainly preferred him to any of the other village swains, but the fact is, the girl was his superior. In everything, except her birth, Margaret Nicholson might have been a lady.”

“True,” rejoined the Earl, with emphasis.

“At the commencement of her last illness, I think it was about six weeks before

her death—worn out by the importunities of her grandmother, who had always favoured Walter—she consented to become his wife within a year. She had been ailing many months, not really ill, but growing gradually thinner and paler; and there was a look of sorrowful resignation in her face, very pitiful to see in one so young. On her twenty-first birthday she asked Mrs. Nicholson to send for me. I shall never forget that visit. The sun was going down as I entered the cottage. I found Maggie sitting up in bed, supported by pillows; a faint colour on her cheek, rendered still brighter by the rich red light that came in through the window. At the close of the interview she put into my hand a paper (I think it was a letter) enclosed in a blank envelope, begging me to take great care of it. If she recovered I was to restore it to her; if she died,

destroy it unopened. I gave the required promise, and kept it faithfully; though I have been almost tempted to blame myself since for having done so without consulting Mrs. Nicholson. In all human probability that letter would have furnished a clue to the cause of poor Maggie's unhappiness and early death."

"Did you never hear who was supposed to be her father?"

"Ah! I was very nearly forgetting the most curious episode of a sad story. When I was summoned to baptize the child the unfortunate young mother gave me a sealed packet, laying her finger on her lip, as though pledging me to secrecy. I put it in my pocket, and did not look at it until my return home, after all was over. On the outside was written, 'Not to be opened till my child is twenty-one.' I locked it up in a desk, among other important papers; and

in the lapse of years had almost forgotten its existence, when poor Maggie's death, at the stipulated age, recalled it to my memory."

"And the contents?"

"Consisted of a picture—a likeness by-the-by—of rather a plain young man, but evidently belonging to the higher ranks of life, a lock of hair, and a slip of cardboard, on which were the initials B. H. The name had evidently been written in full, and then partially scratched out. The first word was long and the other short. I fancied the last was intended for Hague or Hayes."

"Ha!" Lord Oxenten started. "A strange coincidence."

"Why? What do you mean?"

"Nothing, only a thought struck me. Go on."

"I believe it was the poor girl's intention to shield the man who had wronged her till

time had softened her mother's resentment."

"Very likely. What did you do with the portrait?"

"Enclosed it to Mrs. Nicholson with a note of explanation. She wrote a few lines in acknowledgment, but I have not seen her since. Here we are at last. Now for Lord Dunorven."

They were passing through the Castle hall. With a faint smile at the good man's eagerness (Mr. Seagraves was passionately fond of children), Lord Oxenten led the way. The little Viscount proved wakeful and good-humoured, but we have not now any space to devote to him.

When the Earl was left alone he opened a secret drawer in a large travelling case, taking thence a small roll of paper and a manuscript book. There was a sad expression on his countenance, as he cut out the

leaves with a penknife and threw them on the fire, saying with a sigh of intense and weary pathos—

“ ’Tis useless to keep the half of a picture.”

Mr. Seagraves returned to the Rectory, well pleased to have (as he imagined) beguiled his young friend from the contemplation of his own personal affliction. In other respects, the kind-hearted Rector was not exactly at ease. The casual mention of Sir Frederick's name brought back the remembrance of poor Edith's unhappiness. She had written once a few lines only, expressive of gratitude and affection, but containing no address, and conveying an earnest entreaty that her friends would endeavour to forget her. Now, this was about the last thing that the Rector and his wife intended to do. Both had a warm regard for the orphan girl, and hoped that, at some future period, when

time had blunted the keen edge of sorrow, she might be willing to return to them. Consequently, they were hurt and disappointed at the tone of reckless despondency which pervaded her letter, and their feelings towards Morton, as the primary cause, were proportionably unamiable.

Mr. Seagraves's mind running over the probable causes of Maggie's broken heart and swift decline furnished a curious proof how easy it is for the best, as well as the worst of mankind, to give the rein to uncharitable surmises. The very day of Edith's illness he recollected hearing in the village that a handsome stranger had been seen calling at Mrs. Nicholson's cottage. This stranger, whom our readers will doubtless recognise as Molyneux Temple, he somewhat rashly concluded to be none other than the Baronet himself. Sir Frederick Morton was certainly not in good odour at

the Rectory. And yet both Mr. and Mrs. Seagraves had a genuine horror of scandal. They were only human, "judging" by appearances.





CHAPTER VIII.

EDITH IN HER NEW HOME—A MYSTERIOUS
SLIP OF PAPER.



THE house in which Jane Wilmot lived was let off in floors, the ground floor, consisting of a shop, sitting-room, and two tiny bedrooms, being tenanted by Jane, a French governess occupying the next, while the upper story was rented by an aged gentleman who, as the phrase goes, "had seen better days." Edith could not well have chosen more quiet, inoffensive quarters, though the street—at the corner of which the house was situated—was within five minutes' walk of the noisy

thoroughfare of Holborn. Jane Wilmot had been a widow nearly three years. Being clever at fancy work, and anxious to avoid the necessity of again going out to service, she contrived to support herself by the sale of wool patterns and stationery, occasionally executing small orders for her customers, and giving lessons in the mysteries of cross-stitch to the daughters of the neighbouring tradesmen.

The good woman received her “young lady,” as she insisted on calling Edith, with open arms; and though her interest and curiosity were strongly excited by the altered looks of one whom she had known in bloom of early youth and comparative happiness, she very wisely refrained from asking any questions, and only allowed her thoughts to run wild in the endeavour to make her new charge comfortable. Terms were soon arranged. Edith was to pay twelve shillings

a week for her board and lodging. According to this calculation, she would have sufficient money to last her for nearly nine months. Beyond that period she would not trust herself to look, and resolutely determined to seek occupation for the present. She had lived long enough in London to be tolerably well acquainted with the principal localities. Her first visit to the studio in Regent Street we have already narrated. A week later she called again, and was received by the artist with an encouraging smile.

“Ha, Miss Field, I am glad to see you. I have sold six of your drawings for five pounds; which—as in these cases we do not care to make the usual trade reduction—I will hand over to you intact. By-the-by, the purchaser, Captain Lenham, said he should be happy to be of use to you in any way.”

“Captain Lenham,” repeated Edith, dreamily, a dim consciousness overshadowing her mind that she had somewhere heard those words before, “be of use to me?”

“Well, I ought perhaps to say the gentlemen; there were two of them; but I cannot recollect the name of the other. Mr. Mol—, Mol—. What was it? Friends of Sir Frederick Morton.”

The artist, busily engaged in tapping his forehead in a vain attempt to remember, had no opportunity of observing a sudden paleness that overspread Edith’s countenance. Was she never to be at peace? Never to be allowed to forget?

Just then an assistant came up.

“Please, sir, the other drawings of Miss Field’s went this morning. The two gentlemen came again with three ladies. There were only four landscapes. They left two sovereigns for them, and Master Her-

bert put the money on your desk : they also bought a ten shilling copy of the Queen ; that of course went separate. I entered it in the day-book."

"Bravo ! You see, Miss Field, your star is in the ascendant. It is not often that a beginner meets with such a run of good luck. Seven pounds in a week ! You will get quite rich. I should advise you to send me some more."

Scarcely conscious what she was doing, Edith took the money and rose to depart, murmuring some indistinct words of thankfulness. The likeness of Sir Frederick was still lying on the table, but she did not even pause to glance at it. Her only thought was to go away at once, anyhow, anywhere, to escape the pressure of such cruel recollections.

"Poor girl!" said the good-natured artist, as he returned to his work. "Her unex-

pected riches are too much for her. I wonder if those young men really know anything about her? It looks very like it. Ah, well! 'tis a queer world."

Poor Edith, pursued from place to place by the memory of a lost love; tortured by the consciousness that he was dead to her, or worse than dead, betrothed to another, and that her loving him was sin, it is hardly to be wondered at that, on her return to her humble home, she threw herself on the floor in an agony of weeping, opposing to all the entreaties of her faithful attendant the dumb resistance of despair.

"Jane, I am wicked. I would that I could die."

After vainly endeavouring to soothe her, catching, from time to time, the burden of this bitter self-accusation, Mrs. Wilmot changed her tactics, and infusing a certain degree of harshness into her usually affec-

tionate tones, brought Edith to silence by exclaiming—

“Well, there now, Miss Edith, if you’re so wicked as you say, wishing to die ain’t the way to get better. Wicked people ought to be afraid.”

Presently the sobs grew fainter and less frequent, till at length the beautiful head, throbbing with the untold anguish of a wasted affection, was laid caressingly on the old servant’s knee.

“Janie, dear, I couldn’t help it.”

“Poor darling! No. I can understand it all. You’ve been a-loving somebody as didn’t love you; and ’tis hard to strive against the feelings, especially when one has a kind, warm heart like yours; but think as how he wasn’t worthy—think that, Miss Edie.”

Edith was silent: partly because she was unable to frame a denial *in toto*, partly

through shame and vexation at having allowed her secret to be read.

It is a hard lesson to live to be ashamed of a love that was nurtured in innocence. Edith's disposition was not constitutionally calm and equable. Her passionate affection, gathering strength from the fact that it was well-nigh confined to a solitary channel, dammed up by the irremovable rock of her birth, rushed back to the fountain-head, straining and crushing every fibre of a delicate womanly nature. The smooth current of her life at Oxenten Vicarage might in time have weaned her thoughts from the past, and rendered her comparatively happy ; but the unexpected interview with Morton ; the knowledge that he still loved her ; the struggle to leave him a second time, lest haply he should not have the strength necessary to withstand a temptation so dangerous to both—both alike tried—he the

stronger, she the weaker ; and the shadow of a wasted lifetime stretching far out into the future for him, and for her. All this was too much for her sensitive disposition. She would sit for hours, with a book or pencil in her hand, so as to preserve the semblance of occupation, and avoid Mrs. Wilmot's anxious questioning about her health. There were times when she could not draw, when her talent seemed to have deserted her ; and in her deep depression, she began to question its existence. In the first bitterness of disappointed—not necessarily unrequited—affection, the mind is subordinate to the heart. As years pass on, the tide of circumstance will generally, more or less, weigh down the other scale, and the mind regain its balance. Not always. Time, the so-called healer, is often so slow in his movements, that the zest of life is over before his work is finished.

Edith was yearning for rest. In the nature of things it would come—but when?

One day Mrs. Wilmot called her into the shop, to ask her opinion of some corresponding shades of wool. Having performed the required service, Edith remained standing by the counter; her eyes fixed on the floor with an abstracted gaze. There was a slip of paper lying at her feet. Unconsciously she picked it up, and played with it. Some one had probably dropped it, or the wind might have drifted it in through the doorway. It was part of a directed envelope. Three-fourths of the flap had been neatly torn away: on the blank side were pencilled memoranda; on the other a name with which our readers are familiar—

“Molyneux Temple, Esq.,
5, Paper Buildings.”

It was the identical slip of paper that had been stolen with the purse at Regent Circus.

The idea that a thief had possibly entered her shop, and fingered her goods, might not have been exactly agreeable to Mrs. Wilmot; but she remained, and was likely to remain, in blissful ignorance of the whole transaction. But, however it came, the envelope was there. Edith played with it for some minutes, twisting it in and out through her white taper fingers. Suddenly her eye rested on the pencilled writing at the back. A change swept over her face. She looked again, quickly and eagerly, and then turned to the direction with a lingering interest, as if trying to fix it in her memory—

“5, Paper Buildings, Temple.”



CHAPTER IX.

A GIRL WITHOUT A NAME.



THE evening of that day Edith sat alone in the little sitting-room, drawing, or perhaps we ought to say pretending to draw ; for the Alpine landscape before her did not appear to make much progress, and there was a weary, listless look about the face, and a nervous, uncertain movement in the hand, that told of anything rather than earnest, systematic work. Thought and energy appeared to be asleep. Perhaps such moments are a boon to the sorrowful.

Presently, playing with her pencil, she began unconsciously to trace a name. For

an instant the pale cheek brightened with the dangerous pleasure of old association. But it passed as it came ; while keen-eyed conscience revengefully thrust the shaft of suffering deeper. He, the betrothed of another ! What was he—what could he be to her ? With trembling fingers she snatched up the india-rubber and effaced the writing. Not, however, before it caught the eye of Mrs. Wilmot, who had entered unperceived, and was standing, with a puzzled, anxious look, at the back of her young lady's chair. Still thinking herself alone, Edith (not very wisely, it must be confessed,—what woman is wise in matters of affection ?) incontinently began to dream of Sir Frederick's intended bride. Would she prove to be as good as she was reported to be rich and lovely ? Did she love him for himself ? Would she make him happy, be true to him, cling to him alike in sorrow

and joy? Ah, Edith, why ask yourself the question? Would not you?"

At last Jane Wilmot spoke.

"Miss Edie, dear, who is Sir Frederick Morton?"

How that name rang like a knell through the deserted heart-chamber! Again the well-known face and form came out and stood before her in bold relief, as they had first attracted her attention in her lonely, dependent life. Mechanically she repeated the question.

"Yes, dear, you were writing about him a minute ago, when I was looking at your drawing."

Edith Moorfield could not tell a falsehood. By a sudden revulsion of feeling her presence of mind deserted her, and she sat pale and still without attempting a reply.

"Dear child," said the old woman, caressingly, "I cannot bear to see you so unhappy. What is it all about? Tell me."

In order to make Edith's history complete, we must go back to a period of two and twenty years before our story opens.

One stormy evening in March a merchant's clerk, returning from the City to his lodging in Holborn, was startled by the cry of an infant—a low, wailing, melancholy cry, scarcely to be heard through the furious gusts of wind that occasionally swept the streets. As he went on the sound drew nearer, until at last, in the dark shadow of the wall, close to his own door, he perceived a large basket covered with a rug. He lodged over a shop, but at that hour the shop was closed and the landlady asleep. To raise the temporary cradle in his arms and carry it upstairs to his wife was the impulse of the moment, instantly acted upon.

If any of the passers-by had chosen to watch, they might have seen a woman, half hidden by a neighbouring porch, casting

stealthy glances at the stranger. As he closed the door she came forward and stood beneath the lamp. Her dress was that of a respectable upper servant; her age might be forty. There was nothing striking in her manner, though a close observer might have detected in her features something which savoured strongly of insanity or crime, an impression that would certainly have been deepened had any chanced to overhear the words she muttered as she turned away—

“Thank God, the child will not die, and the money is mine!”

She was no murderess, although she might have been, and had cause to thank God for the exemption. Ay, thank Him, as a good many of us do in fact if not in theory—that the less sin having proved successful, has obviated what we are pleased to term the necessity of a greater.

Meanwhile the merchant's clerk and his

wife were sorely puzzled. They were in straitened circumstances, and the idea of admitting the foundling as a member of their own scantily-fed and ill-clothed flock never entered their heads. Still "the pretty babe must not want," was the natural resolve of a kind-hearted woman, and woman's wit soon suggested a remedy.

In a large well-furnished house in a fashionable London square a fair boy lay dying. Dying daily, though the rose on his cheek and the brilliant light in his eyes seemed to speak of hope to the anxious mother, whose eager love would hardly let her rest unless she was doing, or imagined herself to be doing, something for his comfort. The boy's long golden hair glistened in the soft light that came through the partially-closed blinds, and Mrs. Moorfield may have traced an ethereal beauty on the sweet child face that she was so soon to

lose, for as she came nearer and bent down to kiss the smooth white brow, there was a painful, passionate tenderness in her voice and smile.

“Willie, darling, are you sure you feel better to-day?”

“Better, dear mamma? Oh yes. I do not feel ill, only so tired.”

Mrs. Moorfield sighed deeply. Presently there was a knock at the door.

“Please, ma’am, Mrs. Grey has called.”

“Mrs. Grey!” exclaimed Willie, starting from his pillow. “Oh, mamma, do let her come in. I like Mrs. Grey so much.”

The clerk’s wife had long been a protégée of the wealthy widow. Her story was briefly told. Fortunately for the deserted child, Willie determined to adopt it as a sister; and Mrs. Moorfield, who could not bear to refuse him anything, finally consented to the plan.

The little stranger was baptized by the name of Edith Moorfield, the only clue to the mystery of her birth being a card found in the basket, on which was a written assurance that she had no father, and would never be claimed. The last clause was rather satisfactory to her new protectors, particularly to Willie, who regarded her as his especial property. He would lie watching her for hours ; now playing with the tiny waxen fingers ; now striving to awaken a passing animation in the large dark eyes, and for a time it seemed as if this new interest had given him a fresh lease of life. But the hope was vain. One bright spring morning a little coffin was carried out to a cemetery in the vicinity of London ; and the widowed mother, doubly bereaved, sat alone in her desolate room, with her boy's picture lying before her on the table, and his last fond words still ringing in her ears—

“Mamma, darling, you will take care of Edie, and she will comfort you when I am gone.”

Mrs. Moorfield soon learnt to love the child of her adoption, and as that child grew up felt a motherly pride in her beauty and talent. Yet, with strange inconsistency, she was never known to make a will. Probably she put off doing so until increasing infirmities should warn her it was time; but, as is frequently the case, death came in unawares, and not a moment's space was given to counteract the fatal effects of her long procrastination. The needy cousin, who had been so many years kept out of what he considered his due, and now succeeded as heir-at-law, could scarcely be expected to regard with any amiable feeling one who had unconsciously stood between him and his rich relation. “The workhouse is good enough for a girl without a name,”

was his brutal rejoinder to the anxious pleading of Edith's attached attendant. At this juncture, Miss Moorfield, as she was still called by courtesy, rousing herself from the deep melancholy into which she had been plunged by her first great sorrow, sought and obtained a situation as junior teacher in a school. Here she remained five years, when the death of the lady superintendent cast her again upon the world. Her next appointment was that of resident governess to the younger children of Mrs. Elliot, relict of a late sleeping partner in the firm of Elliot and Co. The remainder of the narrative we will give in her own words.

“She (Mrs. Elliot) was not exactly a hard woman, at least, not one generally thought to be unkind. Her whole soul seemed to be bound up in the interests of her children and a limited circle of intimate friends. Yet strangers invariably liked her, there

was a fascination in her manner when she chose to exert it, that few persons were able to resist. She did not, as a rule, torment her dependents; she simply ignored their existence. Did you ever see her, Jane?"

"No, Miss Edie; that is to say, I do not recollect her."

"She was little, and said to have been exceedingly pretty; though her blue lips and sallow complexion, when I first knew her, appeared to contradict the assertion. Her assumed expression was that of a saint-like calm, while under that calm lurked an Etna. Though outwardly a strict disciplinarian, she had little or no regard for truth; consequently, while implicitly obeyed, she was never respected. There was a great deal of religious profession in the house. We had prayers morning and evening; harsh, melancholy prayers, in which every

vowel was drawn out twice as long as it should be; prayers in which we talked of our union, acknowledging ourselves members of one family; and then got up and went about our several duties—I heading the long train of servants—as though our interests here and hereafter were alike quite different. I well remember the desolate feeling with which I rose from my knees again to tread the cheerless round of uncongenial occupation. Even with agreeable pupils teaching is trying, anxious work; but there, in that frigid atmosphere, without one word of sympathy or kindness, regarded by seven spoilt children in the odious light of a task-master, I can only compare it to the life of a horse in a wheel.

“Miss Elliot, the eldest daughter, was a pretty girl, about my own age. We never spoke. She disliked me, and took no pains

to conceal her aversion. Mrs. Elliot once said it was 'a proof of my evil disposition.' I do not think I cared. It is only where we love that we are really vulnerable."

Edith paused and trembled ; then laying her head on Jane's shoulder, went on in a lower tone—

"It was the beginning of March when I first saw Sir Frederick Morton. We met in the hall. There must have been some delay, for I did not hear a knock, and Sir Frederick had just given his card to the footman. I thought to get by unobserved, but it was not to be. He bowed courteously, and then turned back to hold the door open as I passed. It might be over-sensitiveness, or a presentiment of coming evil, but there was something in his cordial smile that brought the tears to my eyes. It was so long since I had been treated with either courtesy or kindness. More than once that

morning I caught myself speculating on the probability of my seeing him again. Alas ! for my future peace of mind, he came the next day at precisely the same hour. It seemed as though our meeting in the street (I had to take the children for a walk) was the fulfilment of a cruel destiny. Again he raised his hat, but without attempting to speak. However, there was a language in his eyes that made my heart beat quickly ; and at night when I retired to rest I felt as if oppressed by a secret. Yet I was not unhappy. Far otherwise. It must have been a species of delirium. In my dreams I seemed to see the stranger. I dreamt we knew each other. I dreamt that he loved me. Oh, Jane ! you don't know what it is to one who has never been loved to dream of affection.

“ No words could describe my feelings on the morrow, when I saw him walking in

Kensington Gardens with Mrs. Elliot and her daughter. He was supposed to be paying Fanny Elliot great attention; there was no foundation for the rumour, but naturally enough, at the time, I believed it was true. The three younger children and I generally went in the carriage. After we had remained an hour or so, Mrs. Elliot would occasionally take them back with her, leaving me to walk home alone. The day to which I refer Sir Frederick made some remark about my pupils, and they were introduced one after the other; while I stood by, feeling shy and awkward, and, in spite of my better judgment, still thinking of that fascinating dream. I felt as if I was going mad. And yet it seemed so real, so life-like. I suppose I was nervous. I let my parasol fall, Sir Frederick picked it up and restored it to me, at the same time lifting his hat and glancing at Mrs. Elliot.

She could not avoid seeing the reproof it was evidently intended to convey. The next moment, spoken in measured, icy tones, I heard the words, 'It is only our governess, Miss Moorfield,' and became conscious of an ominous frown on Mrs. Elliot's countenance. She probably thought I dropped my parasol on purpose to attract a baronet's notice. I have scarcely any recollection of what followed, until I found myself again alone with my pupils, with a present conviction of Mrs. Elliot's displeasure, and a storm-cloud rising in the distance. That time he did not speak to me. He saw at a glance how matters stood. He did not speak to me then, but we met again and again; alas! too often. How well I recollect the quick, elastic step, the frank smile, the kindly expression, the cordial grasp of the hand, that held mine almost before I was aware of his intention. Ah, Jane!

do you wonder that I loved him ; that in the wild delirium of happiness I never paused to consider, as I ought to have considered, the difference of our positions ? To be near him, to hear his voice, to realize his presence, to me was heaven. I had not strength to reason : the passionate affection of my nature, that for five long years had found no outlet, revelling in its newly-bestowed liberty, tore down the barriers of self-restraint and prudence, and sacrificed everything in the worship of one.

“ Why should I dwell upon those interviews ? We loved one another, perhaps ‘ not wisely, but too well.’ He never asked my parentage. And I, without any intention of concealment, never thought of alluding to the subject ; until one day, when returning from the Park, we met a tall dark man, with a peculiarly worn and unhappy cast of countenance. He bowed

to Sir Frederick, and prompted by a sudden touch of curiosity, I inquired who he was. 'Alfred, second son of Lord Trevelyn,' was the reply. 'He has married a girl without a name, and his family refuse to acknowledge him. I fear they are both equally miserable; he at having blighted his prospects by an unworthy union, while she is incessantly pining for the introduction to good society which her marriage has failed to secure her.' Imagine my feelings! 'A girl without a name.'

* * * * *

"At the commencement of our acquaintance I told him I was an orphan, without either friends or relations. He then said that his mother, though excessively proud, was so much attached to him that his wife would be received by her as a daughter, wherever his choice might happen to fall. This assurance quieted my scruples, until

they were startled into new life by the remark on Lord Trevelyn's son. What could I do? Humiliating as the confession might be to me, sooner or later he must know the truth. The idea flashed across my mind that I would tell him there and then. We had reached the Park gates, when I proposed another turn. It was quickly told. I did not raise my eyes, nor did he speak till it was over. Looking up, I saw his features were pale and rigid, and there was a stern expression in his face that I had never seen before. Recovering himself by a violent effort, he contrived to soothe me by words of pitying tenderness, and certainly did his best to remove the impression of what he then called an ill-advised opinion. What we wish we readily believe. I naturally tried to think no more about it. But from that day Sir Frederick's manner towards me

changed. He was not less kind, but there was a touch of sadness and abstraction in his voice and conversation, that told me his mind was preoccupied and ill at ease. My pride—you know I am proud, Jane—forbade my appearing to notice the alteration. For a time I suffered in silence, but my resolution was taken. I would never be the means of bringing misery on him. On the 14th of April we parted. He asked me to bring him a lock of my hair, and I did not refuse; for although I had resolved to break off the engagement, I knew his fiery nature, and felt that I must temporize.

“There was some grand sight to be seen that day, and the Gardens were comparatively empty. Sir Frederick was greatly agitated. I do not know what possessed me. My heart was breaking, but there was an iron mask on my face. He thought

I did not feel as acutely as he did, and when he told me so I smiled, bitterly it is true, but still it was a smile.

* * * * *

“I insisted that we should not consider ourselves in any sense engaged; perfect freedom would be far better for us both. ‘You wish to be free, Edith,’ he repeated, in a hurt tone. ‘Be it so. *I am not free.*’ Then he tried to arrange a plan for our correspondence. This I waived by saying that Mrs. Elliot’s suspicions were aroused, and that he must not write until I gave him permission. And at last—how I had strength to do it I cannot tell—I requested him to leave me, as I particularly wished to return to Belgravia alone. He was evidently surprised and displeased, but his proud temper would not stoop to acknowledge it, and he turned to obey me with a suddenly assumed indifference. Then came

the reaction. I strained my eyes to watch him through the trees, but he did not look back once. And yet I knew that he was suffering; I knew he loved me, though at the time, perhaps, his pride of birth was greater than his love."

As the remainder of Edith's history can be easily gleaned from the foregoing chapters, it is not necessary to repeat it here; nor, in the pressure of more interesting incidents, need we dwell on the old servant's indignant sympathy. It is enough to say that she did not spare Sir Frederick in her heart, though, in obedience to her young lady's wishes, she was obliged to curtail the strong expressions of resentment in which she would otherwise have indulged.

It had been an eventful day; the turning point of interest in a romance of reality.

When alone in her chamber Edith took out the pencilled envelope, and, after reading

it again with a feverish impatience, buried her face in her hands with a cry of despair.

“Why should I seek to unravel the mystery? God help us both; it is now too late.”





CHAPTER X.

MARY MORTON GAINS A NEW INTEREST
IN LIFE.

DECEMBER set in dark and cheerless. There was a slight improvement in Mary Morton's health, but scarcely enough to warrant any favourable anticipations; and Sir Frederick, notwithstanding the presence of Marion, continued to spend the greater part of his time by the couch of his invalid sister.

It was now within three weeks of the period originally appointed for his marriage, and the ceremony, though indefinitely postponed, was expected to take place as soon

as Mary had sufficiently recovered to be able to take part in it. Would that ever be? He scarcely dared think of the alternative. The storm of passion, naturally excited by an unexpected and painful interview with his first love, had given place to a settled melancholy. Fortunately, his sister's illness afforded a plausible excuse, or the circumstances might have aroused suspicion in the mind of his beautiful betrothed.

One morning he received a letter from Lord Oxenten. The deep black edge, the well-known handwriting, somewhat more tremulous than its wont, shook the Baronet's defensive resolution, and prepared the way for a softer emotion. "Poor Dunorven!" he murmured, as he broke the seal, his thoughts involuntarily reverting to earlier days and bringing back with the boyish name boyhood's many and varied recollections—powerful pleaders, when the friendship thus

begun has grown with years and ripened in manhood—"poor Dunorven! Why should I judge him? He has suffered enough."

He sat for some seconds with the letter half open in his hand. Sir Frederick Morton did not often indulge himself in day-dreams, but his imagination had suddenly conjured up a picture of felicity, such as he had once hoped for, and found so hard to relinquish. What if Mary should yet live, live to be happy? What if Lord Oxenten, when the first bitterness of grief was over and time had softened down the sharp edge of bereavement, should turn for comfort to the gentle spirit whose love he had unwittingly won? What if she should respond? Pride whispered that such a termination might be humiliating rather than consoling. Could he really wish it? Unable to answer satisfactorily, he unfolded the letter.

It was dated November 30th.

“ MY DEAR MORTON,—

“ I have made up my mind to go abroad for some months. This place has become insupportable. I must leave it altogether, and the sooner the better. According to present intention I shall make a tour through Europe—perhaps to the East, returning through Palestine and Egypt. My chief anxiety is to find a home for my boy. Will you help me? I know no other friend to whom I would so gladly apply. He wants, what I cannot get for him elsewhere, the tender care of a refined and cultivated woman. Morton, your sister is ill; I dare not ask her to take charge of my poor little motherless nursling. Will you? Do! and Heaven bless you.

“ I am deeply thankful to hear Miss Morton’s health continues to improve. God grant she may soon be restored to you.

“ Ever yours, OXENTEN.”

Sir Frederick drew a long breath. His dream began to resolve itself into a tangible form, but it would have been hard to determine at the outset whether pain or pleasure was predominant. Only the preceding day Dr. Mayhew had declared his belief that if it were possible to give Miss Morton some fresh interest in life, her naturally good constitution would speedily triumph over the effects of disease ; a judgment in which the other physicians in attendance fully acquiesced.

Ever since the barrier of reserve had been broken down — while Mary clung to her brother with increasing affection — Sir Frederick, notwithstanding the mortification to his pride, could not but acknowledge that the more dangerous symptoms had gradually disappeared. So true is it that sorrow, of any kind, is cut asunder by sympathy. Yet neither ventured to refer to that eventful

morning. Sir Frederick, from natural delicacy, was anxious to avoid recurrence to a painful subject; and the invalid herself appeared to be lost in that mysterious calm which so frequently accompanies very severe illness, and is generally observed to herald approaching dissolution.

“Rouse her from this,” said the doctor. “Give her something to occupy her mind. Indifference to recovery is now the only foe to be dreaded.”

Rouse her! But how? Surely, Providence had furnished the occasion? The care of the infant Dunorven, a sacred charge from *him*, would appeal irresistibly to all her womanly sympathies, and by creating an object in life bring about a desire to live.

On the other hand, the Baronet was an exceedingly proud man, and had been so deeply mortified by the whole affair, that the idea of a constant reminder was intoler-

able. He could not shut his eyes to contingencies. Mary would doubtless grow very fond of the child ; and ultimately Lord Oxenten would return, propose, and be accepted. His dream would be accomplished, though not in the way he had intended. Was that any reason to reject the possibility of its fulfilment ?

An admired modern poetess has said, "Where Love once hath breathed, Pride dieth." And there is certainly much truth in the assertion. After a short, sharp struggle, brotherly tenderness conquered ; and, making a hurried excuse to Marion, who had just come in, Sir Frederick folded the letter, and went upstairs to his sister's room. How to tell her was, after all, the greater difficulty.

As the door opened, Mary looked up wistfully. A faint smile brightened her countenance as she recognised the intruder.

“Dear Frederick, I am so glad you are come.”

After the usual inquiries, Morton placed the letter in her hand, saying, in a constrained voice, “May, here is something I wish you to read;” then, anxious to avoid seeming to observe her, he turned to the window.

We have already noticed the extensive view from this part of the Grange. Even in winter it was sufficiently striking. The Baronet noticed it too; but, in his case, the feelings to which it gave rise were by no means satisfactory. True, far as the eye could reach—from the grand old forest on the left, now withered and sear, save where the Scotch fir stood out in bold relief, as if gloomily proud of its pre-eminence, mocking the delicate tracery of the leafless branches by its patches of dark blue green—on to the right, where a number of scattered home-

steads, with their complement of farm stock, lent life and animation to the landscape; while along the base of the hill wound a rivulet, occasionally swollen to a torrent—all was his. But alas, the once great charm of ownership had given place to a bitter self-reproach. He, the master of that fair inheritance, was no longer master of himself. Soon the whole neighbourhood would ring with congratulations on his marriage. Mary would get well (he felt certain of it now), and then there would be no longer an excuse for postponement.

“Coward that I am,” he muttered; “shall I spare myself at the cost of another?”

Well might he gaze regretfully on the scene before him, where the meanest vassal, if true to himself, enjoyed a freedom which his lord knew not. There was not a heart on those broad lands that would not joyfully render him service; not one that

had not, at some time or other, been bound to the old race by kindness received ; not one but felt a clan-like interest in his happiness. Happiness ! What had he to do with happiness ? It might have been his, and he threw it away. And Edith ? What had become of her ? Where had she hidden her sorrow and affection ? Alas, he had no longer the paltry consolation of believing himself more sinned against than sinning. She had never changed : it was his culpable cowardice that drove her to avoid the temptation of his presence. Now, even if he became so lost to honour as to break off his engagement on the very eve of fulfilment, he knew her pure mind too well not to be convinced that she would repulse him with scorn.

Plunged in a chaos of conflicting thoughts, he had almost forgotten the purport of his visit, when a deep sigh aroused him. Turn-

ing, he met his sister's eyes, fixed on him with a look of earnest inquiry. She did not speak, but there were traces of strong emotion in the stained cheek and quivering lip.

The Baronet forced a smile.

“Well, dear, what say you? Shall the boy come?”

“May he, Frederick?”

“May he? You foolish child, of course he may; only you must make haste and get well, in order to take care of him! Lord Dunorven is a personage of too much importance to be left entirely to servants: our mother has rather a dislike to babies, and you don't surely expect me to look after him?”

Without trusting herself to glance again at her flushed and tearful countenance, he went on cheerfully—

“I shall write to Oxenten to-night. The boy and his nurse will probably arrive

within a week. They shall have the green room, as it is nearest to yours. I suppose I had better give the necessary orders. Take care of my letter."

And with this needless caution he left the room.

Strange to say, that morning (notwithstanding all the agitation which she must have undergone) both the physicians pronounced their patient decidedly better; and Sir Frederick, with a full heart, rejoiced that he had not allowed either pride or wounded feeling to stand in the way of his sister's recovery.

The little Viscount and his Italian foster-mother arrived within the week, bearing another letter from the Earl. Even Lady Morton, who at first showed no slight repugnance to the scheme, was touched and softened by the earnest gratitude of the bereaved young father.

To those who could only judge externally, there was something mysterious in the fact, that while Mary Morton's cheek gradually brightened with the faint glow of returning health, Sir Frederick grew paler, and thinner, and less like himself than ever.

The shield was taken away, and the crisis at hand. Every one congratulated him on his happiness. He heard but the merciless whisper of conscience—conscience clothing itself in the garb of his much-abused honour. “Too late! Too late!”





CHAPTER XI.

MARION AND MINNIE.



NOTWITHSTANDING the uniform kindness of the Morton family, Minnie's life at the Grange was not altogether happy. Many "straws on the surface" warned her that she could not hope to escape the penalty allotted those who have allowed imagination and affection to overstep the bounds of wisdom and discretion. Mrs. Latham, Sir Frederick's housekeeper, was by no means wanting in feminine curiosity: and there was a touch of mystery about the beautiful orphan calculated to excite it to the highest degree: questions

that Minnie was unable to parry, would occasionally arise in the course of ordinary chit-chat; making her feel in her isolation from all human sympathy, that the Baronet's generous solicitude had only made it more difficult to forget the trying scenes through which she had so recently passed. Sir Desborough Denton's prolonged absence was a matter of incessant regret and wonderment to the upper servants, among whom his gay, light manner, well-timed gratuities, and real freedom from pride had made him a great favourite; and (although Minnie's household duties were merely nominal) she could not avoid hearing the general opinion; nor prevent Mrs. Latham retailing for her benefit various scraps of information gleaned in the servants' hall. On these occasions her sudden paleness or involuntary blush, together with an obvious desire to change the conversation, did not escape the keen-

witted housekeeper, who out of such scanty materials had presently woven a romance which, though wide enough from reality, had in it sufficient truth to make the self-conscious heroine exceedingly uncomfortable.

Another circumstance (of which more anon) had given rise to much painful thought and fruitless conjecture: and while Miss Morton's continued illness denied her any chance opportunity of speaking to Sir Frederick, natural timidity, joined to an undefined dread of some possible harm, prevented her entrusting the secret to another.

For some time past she had felt a degree of hesitation as to what course would be best for her to adopt in the event of Sir Frederick's marriage. As yet no one had mentioned the probability of her leaving; it seemed to be taken for granted that she would stay at the Grange, and Lady

Morton had been heard to say that everything would remain on the old footing. But would it? Minnie thought not.

One cold November evening, when Mrs. Latham was in a remarkably communicative humour, she happened to conclude a somewhat severe criticism on Miss Hayes's personal appearance by the remark—

“She is certainly pretty, and when dressed will make a beautiful bride; but I always had an idea that she would marry Sir Desborough Denton. Anyhow, he was very fond of her. James says it is his belief they were engaged when he was staying here last summer. That would account for his never coming now: if so be that she jilted him for our Sir Frederick, poor man!”

It would be difficult to determine whether the good lady intended to apostrophize her master or his quondam friend. The bride-

elect had not succeeded in making herself popular among her prospective dependents: and although they were, most of them, glad that Sir Frederick was going to be married, there were few, if any, who honestly approved of his choice. Perhaps, with the keen insight of simple-minded affection, they felt there was something amiss.

“Engaged while he was staying here last summer!” The words fell with torturing distinctness. Minnie was no casuist, but a horrible suspicion—suspicion now bordering on certainty—had sharpened her intellect. She bent down closer to her stitching, until her rich hair (she had long ceased to braid or bind it), escaping from its caul of network, concealed her pale features and startled expression. Was it possible for one man to love two women? Love! why should she prostitute the word? rather selfishly covet, and seek to betray! Or was

his love merely for the high-born lady, and the wrong, the contumely hers—hers only? Trembling with excitement, she laid her hand on the bodice of her dress, beneath which was hidden a dangerous memento. Yes, it was safe. And then rose the voice of temptation. Why should she not keep it? Who had as good a right to it as she? But what if harm should come of it? Harm of what nature, and to whom? She instinctively shuddered.

At that moment Mrs. Latham, whose ideas flew with extraordinary rapidity from one subject to another, looked up sharply.

“Child, you are cold. How often must I tell you to sit nearer the fire! And positively,” she added, glancing narrowly at the work, “you have put that gore in wrong again! Dear, dear, what can you be thinking of? There, give it to me!”

Poor Minnie! she longed to run away

and hide herself where she could weep unrestrainedly, instead of waiting to receive a lecture on her carelessness, coupled with sundry injunctions and hints respecting gussets and seams, which excellent instruction, in so far as concerned the recipient, might have been equally well left alone. However, she contrived to bear it all with assumed patience, and a real headache soon gave her an excuse for retiring.

Without any apparent cause there was a feeling of mutual distrust between Sir Frederick's intended bride and the lowly village maiden. It could hardly be jealousy on the part of Marion, but whatever it was she did not care to conceal it. Even Sir Frederick himself was struck by her manner, when, on one occasion, he stopped the orphan girl with a kind smile and his customary query—"Well, Minnie, how are you getting on?"

Lady Morton noticed it, too, and perhaps felt slightly relieved when, a few days later, Minnie asked permission to seek a situation. It so happened that Mrs. Lawrence—between whom and the members of the Morton family a warm friendship had been recently cemented—was anxious to meet with a companion, and had written to Lady Morton to assist her in the search. The widow's health was extremely delicate, and the air of F—— so cold as to compel her to relinquish her intention of residing with her son. Her letter concluded thus:—
“I want some one gentle and quiet, by whom a comfortable home would be deemed an equivalent, as, notwithstanding my dear boy's generosity, I am not at present justified in offering a salary.”

Here was every requirement. Minnie had a little money of her own—the fruit of Thomas Brooks's industry and economy.

She was naturally amiable, clever at her needle, and, though only a farmer's daughter, undoubtedly lady-like and gentle. Lady Morton was charmed, although, on reflection, she did not feel sure that Sir Frederick would be altogether pleased by the sudden resolution of his protégée. However, she determined to write to her friend without waiting to consult him, relying on the truth of the old adage, that a "thing well begun is half way to completion."

As Minnie crossed the hall she caught sight of Marion, who stood intently gazing at one of the numerous family pictures which decorated the carved oak panelling. The portrait, generally called "the Captain," was that of an ancient cavalier of the reign of Charles I. who married six wives, and was going to London to look for a seventh, when he died on the way. So ran the story, in proof whereof his six wives, many of whom bore

traces of great beauty, were amicably grouped around him. One of them, a quaint-looking but lovely girl, dressed as a shepherdess, and known by the name of "Editha," or "the Little White Lady," was said to haunt the blue chamber. Tradition declared that she was the last and best-beloved of the six, although she was unable to reciprocate her husband's attachment. Her father forced her into a marriage against her inclination, while her heart lay buried in the grave of her boy-lover, who was slain in the first encounter at Edgehill. Perhaps this might be supposed to account for her unquiet tomb; at any rate, as every old house has its ghost story, so the story of the white lady and her wrongs was devoutly believed in by the superstitious retainers of the Grange.

One grey-headed man, who had been in the Morton service in the time of the gay

and gallant Sir Ronald, grandfather of the present Baronet, was wont to assert that when his late master (who, among his many good qualities, was a little too much given to extravagant generosity) sold the tithing of Redlands to save the honour of his most intimate friend and brother-in-arms, the white lady fell down upon her face in grief and indignation that the fair portion which she had brought into the family should be alienated for the sake of a scapegrace and a stranger. "And," added the old man, triumphantly, as he marked the growing interest of his auditors, "that would never have happened unless the story were true."

Marion may have been wondering what strange attraction there was in the old cavalier's face, that whoever looked at it once must needs look at it again and again; or she may have questioned the right of so many young and beautiful women to sacri-

fice themselves to a man who must have been long past his prime, as his first wife lived to be fifty ; and at best he could only have had a divided heart to give them in exchange. Be that as it may, she was lost in a prolonged reverie.

Superbly dressed in a full robe of violet silk, with a close cut velvet bodice, which displayed to advantage her majestic figure and regal style of beauty, Marion looked, as Minnie involuntarily thought, well fitted to be the mistress of that lordly mansion.

There was a striking contrast between the two girls. To many the orphan's timid, shrinking kind of loveliness would be by far the more winning. Minnie had lost the frank fearlessness which had once been the distinguishing trait in her character. That had passed away with the dawn of womanhood, and left in its stead a nameless some-

thing, half-shame, half-sadness, bespeaking more than anything else a dread of giving offence. Her mourning dress, by calling attention to her recent bereavement, lent a deeper interest to the delicate cheek and slightly compressed lip. Seeing Marion she paused irresolutely. Had she followed her first impulse the whole course of our narrative might have been changed. Fortunately, however, for the principal actors, before she had courage to carry out her intention, Marion turned abruptly, recognising the intruder with a glance of astonishment, her whole manner expressive of indignation and annoyance. Minnie, startled out of self-possession, feeling to a certain extent guilty in thought, and perhaps apprehensive of the consequences, coloured in confusion, stammered some unintelligible excuse, and hurried — almost like one caught in a crime—to the entrance of the

long dark passage which led to the servants' hall.

“Close that door,” said Miss Hayes, haughtily.

Ay, close it against the possibility of escape, fair traitress ! The toils are around thee. Better, a thousand times better, have knelt to that lowly village maiden than have repelled her by a glance of disdain.





CHAPTER XII.

THE PROSPECTIVE MISTRESS OF THE GRANGE.



AS the door closed Minnie leant her burning forehead against the cold stone wall. Were her senses deserting her? What had she to do with Sir Frederick's betrothed? Might she not after all be mistaken? What if a spirit of latent jealousy had prompted her to imagine evil without cause? And yet, whence came that mysterious object, which had well-nigh driven her mad by the recollections it excited? Was that, too, a delusion of her own disordered fancy? Or had *he* sent it to torment her by the renewal of a temptation which she had scarcely strength to resist?

Was he near her then, watching her every movement, hemming in her lonely path, narrowing the circle day by day, till, alone and defenceless, deserted by her better angel—for the tempter whispered she would love her betrayer—a chance opportunity should place her in his power? Was it indeed a reminder of his terrible vow that, be where she might, go where she chose, she should meet him again?

She would not keep it another day. She had done very wrong in keeping it at all. Come what might it should haunt her no longer. And then she would leave the dear old Grange for ever, go far away from the quiet village, where her grandfather and great-grandfather had lived and died; away from the old church with its solemn reminiscences, where, as a child, she had loved to wander among the curious crumbling tombstones; and where, under the shadow of

the yew-tree, by the eastern porch, her father and mother lay buried in one grave ; away from the spot where she had first met Sir Desborough ; where, in the bright morning of her youth he told her he loved her, ay, loved her better than aught else that God had created or man could possess.

It was not true of course, but for all that she would never forget it. Again the tempter whispered, "What if it were true? What if he did love you as every true woman would wish to be loved, and in your ignorance you wilfully misjudged him?" Was it all a miserable dream? The unhappy girl shuddered, and looked wildly around her. It seemed as if the words were spoken by a human voice, and that that voice had borrowed his tone. "What if it were true? What if it were true?"

Scarcely knowing what she did, Minnie went to call Mrs. Latham, but in her agita-

tion entirely forgot to deliver Lady Morton's message—an omission which gave rise to more than one household blunder.

The housekeeper, who was just in the middle of an entertaining bit of gossip, did not look particularly well pleased at being interrupted.

“Well, child, what is it?”

Minnie's thoughts were adrift, and she answered at random—

“I am going to leave—going into a situation.”

“Bless me! what ails the girl? I wonder what on earth put that into her head? Well, if you only came to tell me of your folly you might have spared yourself the trouble. A situation, indeed! I should like to know what sort of a situation you are fit for? Why, you have no more strength than a baby!”

To do the good old lady justice it must

be observed, that she had in reality a very great regard for her young friend, and it was chiefly regret at the thought of losing her society that led her to express such decided disapprobation.

Minnie bent her head meekly, deprecating the storm.

“Lady Morton said I was to tell you.”

“Her ladyship can’t be serious. Why, only the other day she told me to be very careful not to let you over exert yourself. And now you want to make me believe that she is going to send you out to be over-worked elsewhere.”

“Lady Morton does not send me; I wish to go myself,” murmured poor Minnie, choking back the rebellious tears.

“Hoity-toity! Independent, forsooth! Will you be good enough to inform me what amount of work you expect to get through?”

“I shall not have very much to do; I am going to be companion to a lady.”

“Companion to a lady! A nice companion you will make! Why, you haven’t a word to say for yourself! I’m sure sometimes I might as well talk to a post!” (Mrs. Latham forgot she talked so much herself that there was very little chance for anybody else to edge in.) “Ah, well! I dare say you will be very glad to get away from a cross old woman like me.”

Minnie could not bear this.

“Oh, Mrs. Latham,” she sobbed, “how can you be so cruel?”

Considerably mollified by the sight of her favourite’s distress, the old lady resumed, in a much more gentle voice—

“Well, then, dear, tell me all about it. I am sure I don’t wish to make you unhappy. Has any one said anything to hurt you?”

Minnie shook her head.

“Does Sir Frederick know?”

Another shake of the head.

“Then I guess he wont like it. In the first place, it looks ungrateful; and, in the second, he told me himself he had promised Mr. Brooks, the very day he died, that you should always find a home at the Grange, and a promise made to the dying is sacred.”

Minnie's tears flowed afresh at the sound of her grandfather's name; but the recollections of that eventful evening only strengthened her resolve.

“There, there, dear, don't take on so. I ought not to have mentioned it. Be a good girl, and tell me what makes you wish to go away.”

“I cannot,” faltered the orphan.

“Is it on account of our master's marriage? Is it anything to do with Miss Hayes?”

Minnie was silent. Essentially truthful,

she wanted time to frame an answer. Then, fearing that her silence might be thought to imply what it ought not, she clasped her hands imploringly.

“Please, dear Mrs. Latham, do not ask me any questions. Pray, do not think that—that——”

“I shall think what I like,” retorted the housekeeper, with a touch of offended dignity, “ay, and say what I like too. I say ’tis a shame for her to be playing the mistress before she has the right. I’ve a good mind to speak to Sir Frederick himself—that I have!”

“But there is nothing to speak about—indeed, indeed, there is not!” expostulated Minnie, now in a state of unfeigned alarm. “It is all my own feeling. I—I do not like Miss Hayes,” she added, with a desperate effort forcing herself to an explanation which if not the whole truth, was

at any rate true. "I do not like Miss Hayes. I do not think I shall ever learn to like her, and therefore it is far better that I should go away at once."

"You will have to get Sir Frederick's permission first," rejoined Mrs. Latham, triumphantly; "and I do not think he will give it you. Anyhow, you must tell him your reason for wishing to leave, and you can't tell him *that!*"

Tell Sir Frederick Morton that she disliked his betrothed? No, certainly not!

That evening, after dinner, the Baronet heard the news of his protégée's intended departure; heard it, too, with an ill-concealed uneasiness which did not escape Marion, and for the moment almost puzzled Lady Morton. After an uncomfortable silence, he addressed his mother—

"Why did you not tell me before?"

“ My dear Frederick, I only heard it this morning.”

“ And wrote off to Mrs. Lawrence without consulting me?”

“ You were nearly two hours with Mary,” observed Lady Morton, casting about in her mind for an available excuse. “ I did not like to disturb you then, and directly after luncheon you took Marion for a drive. Of course, I could not tell you before the servants, and there was no other opportunity.”

“ Why not have put off your reply to Mrs. Lawrence? A day or two could not have made much difference.”

“ I am not so sure of that. Mrs. Lawrence knows my correspondents always receive immediate attention. Indeed, I consider it an essential mark of good breeding to answer letters as speedily as possible.”

Sir Frederick was evidently distressed and

displeased. He leant back in his chair, shading his eyes with his left hand, and for some minutes was silent ; while Lady Morton exerted herself to the utmost to prevent Marion receiving an unfavourable impression from such apparently uncalled-for notice of an unimportant circumstance.

“ Did Minnie give you any reason ? ” asked the Baronet at length ; the abruptness of the question proving he had not heard a word that intervened.

“ No—well, yes. She thought it right ; it would suit her better in every respect,” said Lady Morton, in a hesitating tone, conscious that she had got into a dilemma.

Sir Frederick glanced impatiently at his mother.

“ There is something in this which I cannot understand.”

“ Perhaps it may not be too late even

now?" suggested Marion, with a certain iciness of manner, which, by a sudden revulsion of feeling, drew the thoughts of her betrothed into a different channel. He looked at her inquiringly. Had his ears deceived him, or was Marion secretly jealous? Vexed with his mother's precipitancy, and still more angry with himself for betraying his annoyance, he made a successful effort to change the conversation, and for a time Minnie seemed to be forgotten.

Half an hour later, well satisfied with the apparent result of her endeavours to promote good humour, Lady Morton went upstairs to spend the remainder of the evening with Mary, leaving Marion and Sir Frederick to entertain each other. No light task under the existing circumstances. Both were constrained and unnatural. After taking up one book after another in order to avoid the necessity of talking, Marion went to a

recess and began to turn over some music. Feeling it incumbent on him to break an awkward silence, Sir Frederick followed and asked her to sing.

Though not particularly anxious to oblige him, Marion felt that singing would be better than an attempted explanation, and was about to comply when a knock was heard without.

Sir Frederick advanced a few steps. "Come in."

There was a pause, a seeming difficulty with the fastening, and the door was thrown open.

Pale and trembling, almost like a criminal in presence of her judge, Minnie Brooks came out of the shadow, and stood beneath the glare of the gaslight in the middle of the room.



CHAPTER XIII.

AN UNEXPECTED DENOUEMENT.

PARTIALLY concealed from observation by the heavy folds of the crimson curtain which swept across her exquisitely-moulded neck and shoulders, like the framework of an old picture, Marion leant against a corner of the piano, mechanically playing with her betrothal ring. For some seconds the orphan did not raise her eyes. When she did, it was with a look of such deep misery, that Sir Frederick started in pained surprise.

“My poor child! what is the matter?”

Are you not well? Why do you think of leaving us?"

Minnie made no immediate reply. The meaning of the words had evidently failed to reach her. She glanced nervously round the room as if seeking time to consider, then suddenly becoming conscious of Miss Hayes's presence, faltered out—

"I beg your pardon, Sir Frederick, I thought you were alone."

This was about the most unlucky remark she could have hazarded. An impatient movement and the rustling of a rich silk dress told the Baronet it had not passed unnoticed. Marion stood watching with a feeling of suppressed irritation, inwardly resolving to make Minnie's departure a *sine quâ non* as soon as she was mistress of the Grange, however much Sir Frederick might continue to oppose it. With feverish restlessness she awaited his reply.

“You can have nothing to say to me that Miss Hayes may not hear.”

There was a kind of terror in the girl's face that again roused Marion's curiosity. Minnie's hands were tightly clasped and her lips quivered painfully, while her large brown eyes fixed themselves on the Baronet with a voiceless entreaty. Even Sir Frederick was perplexed by her manner. He could only account for such extreme agitation in one way, and that seemed too far off, too improbable for credence. Had she seen Sir Desborough? Impossible! She never went outside the house alone, and he knew his quondam friend too well to imagine for a moment that he would venture to address her while under the shelter of the Grange.

“Speak, Minnie. You can have nothing to say to me that Miss Hayes may not hear.”

A change came into that wild pale face; a forced calm, a spasmodic strength that would die in the using.

“They told me you were alone, Sir Frederick, or I would not have disturbed you. You must forgive my hesitation. When you spoke to me so kindly, I could not help thinking of my poor grandfather, and how he would have thanked you for all that you have done for me. I cannot thank you, for I have no words. The reason I wanted to speak to you this evening was——”

Marion bent eagerly forward.

“To give you this. I found it in the corridor.”

She placed a large locket on the table; a plain case of dead gold, crossed by a stripe of brilliant blue enamel, attached to which was a piece of peculiar French ribbon, that Sir Frederick at once knew to be Marion’s.

A faint cry, a long-drawn breath, the utterance of a spirit in pain, came through the death-like stillness; or it might have been the wind that whistled mournfully round the corners of the house.

The lamp flashed high, falling full on the three actors in that eventful scene. Morton looked at the glittering toy with a mysterious foreboding. As he took it up he touched the spring, disclosing a highly-finished miniature, which, as our readers have probably surmised, was that of Sir Desborough Denton.

“Found it in the corridor,” he repeated, sternly, surprise contending with incredulity in his searching glance and distant manner.

“Yes, sir,” rejoined Minnie, unflinchingly, and there was something which carried conviction with it in her tone; “I found it in the corridor more than three weeks ago,

and ought to have given it up at once, but you were always engaged, and——”

She could not bring herself to say that it was on the very evening of Miss Hayes's arrival.

“Enough!” ejaculated Sir Frederick, sharply and briefly; and Minnie, only too glad to escape any farther questioning, immediately retired.

Not a sound escaped the Baronet's lips. He stood sternly silent; the rigidity of his features, and a deepening frown, alone bearing witness to a storm of indignation that shook his inmost soul. The outspoken remonstrances of Lenham; his own inward misgiving; the shadow he had once thrust from him as a groundless suspicion—suddenly assumed the shape and substance of reality. Had he any longer felt a doubt, one glance at the pale face in the pier-glass opposite would have been sufficient to con-

vince him. In those first moments he did not think of the future ; the prospective release from an engagement into which he had so unadvisedly entered, never once occurred to him : his whole mind was absorbed by a bitter sense of wrong ; and his every feeling as a man and a gentleman rose up in arms against the attempt to trifle with his honour. Was it for this he had waged such constant warfare with himself ? Was it for this he had been willing to confront the agony of a life-time, lest, by his own selfish action, he should fix a blot on his hitherto stainless escutcheon ? How manfully he had striven to keep his word in the face of the most terrible temptation, Heaven only knew ; and now, now, to learn that the heart for whom it was plighted came to him self-offered, second-hand, from another ! And that other ! His blood grew hot. There were but two ways in

which a man could, so to speak, lay siege to a woman. Was he, a Morton, so nearly the dupe of a deep-laid scheme? How otherwise interpret the assumed attachment, which in the outset had so wrought upon his pity? A curse on his short-sightedness! He had been led to believe himself the preferred of ten thousand, while she, his chosen, apparently so pure, could wear the image of a libertine in the very home of her betrothed.

He gazed upon her, as she stood doggedly before him; beautiful, most beautiful; but seared and stricken, with the harrowing loveliness of a fallen angel, rebellious even in exile. Strengthened to endure by the impossibility of atonement, she would brave it out if she could: he might drag her to the bar of his self-constituted judgment; he might tear away the veil from her vainly-schemed deception; but she would not

uncover it herself; she would not voluntarily advance one step towards the goal. He thought her hardened, and his brow grew dark. What was all that witching beauty but a treacherous mask?

He knew it now, and the links of passion that had bound him for a moment snapped in the discovery.

But he would not condemn her unheard.

“I need not look far to find the owner of that locket; unless my senses deceive me, it is yours.”

Had he said, “Is it yours?” she might have framed a denial. But though her lips moved defiantly, the power of expression failed her.

“How you could wear *his* gift.” (Oh, the measureless scorn that spoke in that one word *his*!) “How you could wear *his* gift, while professing to love me, is beyond my comprehension. And what possible

motive? what reason could there be for this long tissue of falsehood? You were rich and beautiful!" (He spoke in the past tense, as if unwilling to acknowledge her existence in any way connected with the present.) "You were rich and beautiful. There was surely no necessity for you to scheme and plan for such ignoble game?"

The tone of utter contempt struck home. She could not answer, but the little white hands fluttered and clenched as if seeking each other for support, pressing closer and closer, till the straining sinews rose ridge-like beneath the clear waxen skin. Had he no pity?

None—none. She had deceived him in a matter on which no man brooks deception. She, whose heart for him should have been a pure white stone, had graven a record there which no tears of after repentance

could wash away. She had played fast and loose with his credulity, and planned and schemed for his affection as for a thing of purchasable value. Why should he pity her?

“I see it is useless to wait for an explanation. You have probably none to give, and I am very willing to spare both you and myself unnecessary pain. At the same time you know my sentiments sufficiently to be aware that after what has transpired this evening everything must needs be at an end between us. The woman whom I intend to marry—if, indeed, I ever marry now—must have no other first affection to outride or counterbalance mine. Had you not taken such pains, before we were engaged, to impress on my mind a belief contrary to the truth we should never have come together.”

He was cruel, cruel in his stern sense of

“justice to himself.” Men are accustomed to claim as their right what not one man in ten thousand has to give, the first freshness of the young heart’s fragrance, the honeysip while the dew is on the flower. And for the happiness of the married state, it is perhaps well that they are thus exacting; for the love which is all in all to woman to man is but an episode, or a gift measured rather by the want of it than the possession. Men have the rush of business, the pleasures of intellect, a thousand stirring cares, anxieties, and aims, that make up their sum total of existence; women have but the narrow stream of the inner life, boundless in imagination and limited in fact, or perhaps we should rather say “exclusive;” for though confined within a certain bound, whence diverging it is waste and sullied, infinitude lies in its bosom.

It is said that the hunted deer will turn. Marion's spirit rose in proportion to the harshness of her accuser.

"It is enough," she said at length, with a haughty self-assertion, drawing up her majestic figure to its full height, while her cheek crimsoned with pride and wounded feeling. "It is enough, Sir Frederick, and more than enough. I shall return home to-morrow. Fortunately it is within three days of the period originally fixed for my departure; but as long as circumstances compel me to accept your hospitality, spare me a repetition of your taunts on what cannot be recalled. Pray excuse me to Lady Morton. I wish to retire."

And with a slight inclination of the head she swept out of the room.

As he came back to the table Morton took up the miniature, which, untouched by Marion, still lay where he had left it.

For a moment he looked as if he would like to crush it into atoms, then throwing it from him with a muttered exclamation that sounded very like an oath, he paced impatiently up and down the room, in a state of excitement that augured ill for the original of that fated picture, should he ever chance to cross his path. But passion, like everything else in this world, is worn down by excess. Presently he became more calm, and feeling that the hateful souvenir was hardly safe in his presence, he sealed it up in an envelope and directed it to Miss Hayes.

On the landing he met the person of whom he was in search, Elise, Marion's French maid, and charging her to deliver the packet to her mistress, he sent a message to Lady Morton that he wished to see her in her boudoir.



CHAPTER XIV.

THE SOONER A DARK PAGE IS TURNED OVER
THE BETTER.

MARION went upstairs with the same even step and haughty bearing. Not a muscle of her face quivered. The hand that held the small silver night-lamp was firm and steady ; and, as her rich dress swept the ground, she gathered her scarf around her with the air of an empress. But once within the shelter of her own room, with the door locked against the possibility of intrusion, a change passed over her features, dark and sudden as when the sunlight is withdrawn from a picture. She placed the

lamp on a table, stood still for a moment, then slowly and methodically drew off her betrothal ring, removed the rich circlet from her neck, and undid the fastenings of the bracelets that clasped her rounded arms, *his* gifts, to be worn no longer. Unlocking her writing-case, she took thence several letters, hesitated, as if tempted to read them, then, with an effort, placed them unopened by the side of the glittering heap. Presently they were packed together in a case, covered with stiff paper, and secured by sealing-wax and string. Only the address remained.

For the moment a slight nervousness was perceptible in her manner. Once and again she pressed her hand to her forehead, with an air of bewilderment; took up the pen, tried it, and put it down irresolutely; then hearing a step, wrote hastily, "To Sir Frederick Morton," and laid the parcel on one side, just as somebody knocked at the door.

It was only Elise—Elise whose curiosity was strongly excited by the commission with which she had been charged. She knew that her mistress had retired unusually early, without any premonitory symptom of indisposition, and that Sir Frederick was closeted with Lady Morton. An hour before she had met Minnie Brooks coming from the drawing-room, and when she stopped, intending to speak to her, Minnie started back as if she had seen a ghost. Then Sir Frederick nearly frightened her out of her senses, as she was loitering on the landing, by coming up with his pale stern face and searching glance, like some gigantic spectre, when she thought it was the footman. “Give that to Miss Hayes.” Give what? Apparently a hard case, perhaps a likeness or a locket. She carefully felt the envelope, though she dared not tamper with the seal, and her suspicion

of some mysterious unpleasantness seemed to grow into a certainty. However, if she hoped to discover anything from Miss Hayes's countenance she was disappointed. Marion took the packet as a matter of course, and without looking at it coldly motioned her attendant to withdraw.

On her way to the servants' hall, Elise met the head-groom, who was a great favourite with Sir Frederick, and supposed to be much in his confidence.

"Wait a bit, ma'mselle; I was just looking for you."

"For me?" repeated the girl, her dark features brightening in expectation of hearing something that might tend to elucidate the puzzle.

"Yes; Sir Frederick said Miss Hayes might want the close carriage some time to-morrow. I was to come to you for orders, and then tell Jarvis to be round."

“Did he say——” Elise looked inquiringly, stammered, and was silent: the man evidently either suspected nothing, or was too discreet to give his imagination words.

“What time shall I tell him?”

“Stay a moment; I had better go and ask.”

She tripped lightly along the passage, returning in about two minutes.

“Eight o’clock exactly.”

That night Marion sat up very late, ostensibly to superintend the labours of her maid; probably the excitement she had undergone made it impossible for her to sleep. As one costly dress after another was taken from the wardrobe to be folded and packed, the eyes of the fair owner occasionally wandered to the large glass opposite. The vision of beauty and grace reflected there might have whispered consolation to a stronger mind than Marion’s. Certain it is that, as

she leant back on the couch like a second Helen, partially enveloped in a scarlet dressing-gown, one hand half buried in her clustering hair, while the other lightly pressed the warm covering to her snow-white bosom, though a bright wood-fire precluded the idea of cold—a touch of triumph blended with the pain of retrospection. She was still beautiful—most beautiful, and her woman-nature revelled in the consciousness. Sir Frederick's sarcasms had crushed out the mingled softness and sense of dependence that might in time have simulated love; and now her only thought was to escape, to break with the past at once and for ever; not in shame, nor repentance; rather with a sudden self-appropriation of her father's maxim, that “there is a dark page in every one's life, and the sooner it is turned over the better.”

It was midnight before Sir Frederick

left his mother's boudoir; the interview proved a trying one to both: the whole affair seemed so incomprehensible, nay, more, so utterly improbable, considering the position of the accused, that Lady Morton at first rather doubted the evidence of her own senses. Had the suggestion of double-dealing on the part of Marion been conveyed to her by any other than her son, she would have repelled it as unworthy her credence: and although the facts themselves were incontrovertible, a natural reluctance to believe herself mistaken in her estimate of character induced her to ask a reiteration of the story, until Sir Frederick, fairly worried and wearied, broke from her on the plea of headache.

Then, for a long time, she sat painfully musing on the uncertainty of the future: unwillingly forced to admit that her favourite day-dream had been rudely dispelled; while

memory, with perverse tenacity, recalled the disappointment of six months previous ; and with the thought of Florence Glendon, came back the recollection of an incident which had troubled her then. Whose was that carefully guarded souvenir, that lock of glossy, soft brown hair ?

Sir Frederick himself passed a sleepless night. Hour after hour he sat leaning against a table, resting his head on his hand, pondering the occurrences of that eventful evening. At length he was free—free from the chain that his own hand had forged ; free, (how his heart bounded at the thought !) free to seek one whom he loved so truly, and whom — was it so indeed ? —through his culpable vacillation, he had wronged so deeply. But it must not be imagined that his reflections were by any means those of unmixed joy ; indeed, under the circumstances, he scarcely dared trust

himself to rejoice. He had lost all trace of Edith's whereabouts, and he had reason to believe that Mr. and Mrs. Seagraves were equally uninformed; besides, even if found, he knew her proud though gentle spirit too well to delude himself into a belief that her confidence would be easily restored. He was not at all sure in what light she would regard his sudden rupture with Marion Hayes, how far his explanations however truthful in themselves, would tend to reinstate him in her esteem. Her feelings too might have undergone a change: the effort to forget one who (to judge by his ill-advised engagement) had so readily forgotten her, might have proved only too successful; and the consciousness of justly lowered self-respect, like a black shadow, looked blacker in the brightness of his newly-regained freedom. To find, merely to lose her! There was agony in the thought, and

he thrust it from him in terror: better, a thousand times better, that their paths in life, thus severed at the outset, should go on and on diverging, till lost in eternity. And with the picture of his own creation arose a vague presentiment that thus it would be; that his trial would assume that form: happiness would be, as it were, within arm's length, and yet would incessantly elude his grasp. A just requital this for his hereditary pride, that he, who once could not resolve to marry a girl without a name, though peerless in beauty and goodness, should henceforth, in unavailing regret, seek that which might have been his, seek carefully, and in vain.

And then, by a swift transition, his thoughts reverted to Marion, and the long tissue of deception of which he had so nearly been the victim. What could have been her motive? Unable to solve the enigma,

he went to bed, hoping to obtain a few hours' repose ; but the attempt was fruitless, and he was up and dressed before the time fixed for Miss Hayes's departure. After a short sharp struggle with himself, he determined to go down and see her off, taking care to leave his room just as the travelling carriage drawn by a pair of beautiful greys came round the slope, and drew up at the front entrance. It was exactly eight. The cheerless daybreak of December lent an unusually sombre tint to the carved oak panelling and the large oil paintings, the outlines of which seemed to have lost themselves in some undistinguishable colouring. As Miss Hayes and the Baronet advanced from opposite directions, the few servants who were present drew back into the shadow. Marion gave one quick glance ; a deep flush momentarily overspread her features, but she was equal to the occasion, recovered

herself instantly, and crossed the hall with an unfaltering step. Mechanically Sir Frederick assisted her to the carriage, and closed the door. For a moment his keen grey eye sought hers, more it would appear in sorrow than in anger. She bore it unflinchingly, for her pride was strained to the utmost, and there was nothing but quiet self-possession in the graceful bend of the head which silently acknowledged his courtesy. Morton was calm; but to an indifferent spectator he would certainly have passed for the more agitated of the two.

One moment more and she is gone—gone, not to return.

For awhile Sir Frederick stood watching the horses, as, held in by a tight rein, they wound slowly down the hill. Turning, his gaze wandered to the family arms and motto, which were deeply cut over the stone porch,

“Magni nominis umbra.”

Cold, cold and comfortless, unless shared
with another.

Oh, life, life ! Why cannot we learn thy
lessons in time ?





CHAPTER XV.

A STRANGE VISITOR.



T was about half-past twelve when a railway cab drew up before the door of Bernardin Hayes's mansion in Belgravia.

Much surprise was excited among the servants by the unexpected arrival of their young mistress, as it was well known that Mr. Hayes would be indignant at the idea of his daughter being compelled to avail herself of a hired conveyance. Marion's manner was unusually distant. When in answer to her inquiry, "Is my father within?" the old butler was about to lead the way, she peremptorily dispensed with

his attendance, choosing rather to go upstairs alone. This did not tend to lessen the general curiosity, and as soon as Elise had superintended the removal of the luggage, she was overwhelmed by a multitude of questions, to which she was either unable or unwilling to reply.

Mr. Hayes was in his private room, a kind of dressing-room furnished like a study. As she reached the outer door, which opened into a conservatory, a slight shudder convulsed Marion's frame. There were unpleasant reminiscences connected with this quarter of the house, which the beautiful heiress in vain endeavoured to forget. Conquering her emotion by a violent effort, she tried the handle. It was unfastened, and with noiseless step she crossed the conservatory and knocked lightly at the opposite door. There was no answer, and probably from her manner she did not intend there should be. A sudden thought

appeared to strike her. She untied her bonnet and placed it on a bench, took out the long pins that sustained the weight of her glorious hair, unbraided and combed it straight off her forehead, using a single tress as a band for the whole. It was a marvellous change which was thus speedily effected. The features themselves were unaltered, but there was a wild weird look in the face, a something harder, colder, and sterner than is rightly the heritage of beauty and youth. She was exceedingly pale, and her black velvet cloak and heavy travelling dress seemed to heighten the contrast. They who knew her best might have failed to recognise her, a practical proof how much style has to do with expression. That face and form were grandly beautiful still, but the softness, the tenderness, was gone.

Bernardin Hayes was seated at a writing table with a roll of bank-notes in his hand.

Within the last three weeks he seemed to have grown much older. There were deeper wrinkles on his forehead, and his few scanty locks had perceptibly assumed a greyer tinge. As the door swung noiselessly on its hinges, he muttered something to himself. The sound caught the ear of Marion, and a bitter smile curled her lip as she advanced farther into the room.

“Marguerite, Marguerite! why do you haunt me thus? There is gold, gold in plenty. What would you have more? I will atone—I will atone.”

“Too late!” murmured Marion, between her teeth. It might have been the whisper of the Evil One. With a stifled cry Bernardin started to his feet, turning so as to confront the intruder. For the moment he failed to recognise her. Blinded by remorse, his troubled conscience saw but the avenging spirit of the past, and the name of

one long since dead again hovered on his lips.

“My dear father, do you not know me?”

The words were tender, but the tone was not. Slowly recovering himself, the conscience-stricken man gazed doubtingly on his beautiful child.

“Marion! Is it you? What is the matter? Why do you come to me thus?”

“Ah, my hair. I had forgotten.”

A consummate actress; it suited her purpose to appear unconscious. The disguise had served her turn.

Raising one hand negligently to her forehead, she extended the other to her father. Bernardin drew her towards him, and kissed her fondly. Whatever his crimes or failings, his affection for the lovely being whose fortunes were indissolubly linked with his own, was deep and well-nigh unbounded.

“But, my darling, how came you here?”

We did not expect you for some days. Is Lady Morton with you?"

"No; only Elise. Papa," she continued, looking steadily at him, and articulating each syllable with a strange emphasis, "my engagement with Sir Frederick Morton is broken off. I shall never marry him now."

"How! what? Has he dared?" Mr. Hayes's countenance flushed heavily. He had set his heart upon this marriage, and the storm of indignation must fall somewhere.

"Broken off! It cannot—nay, by Heaven, it *shall* not be. Marion, this is not your doing?"

"Mine—and another's. Stay," she exclaimed, imperiously, seeing that he was about to interrupt her; "it is useless to ask me any questions. Sir Frederick and I have found out that we are not suited to each other, and better now than here—

after. Why not carry out your former scheme? Let us go abroad at once, and I promise you, if you will only give me time, I will contract a marriage that shall satisfy your utmost ambition."

She raised her head in proud self-consciousness.

"Foolish girl! where would you find a husband like Sir Frederick? He would have stood by us to the last; would have made our honour his own."

"Our honour!" repeated Marion, contemptuously.

Bernardin winced beneath her irony, though he went on without appearing to observe it—

"Yes; for his own sake he would have stood firm had you been his wife."

The conversation was here terminated by the entrance of a servant, bearing a letter on a silver salver.

The man hesitated, as though conscious of a disagreeable errand. Mr. Hayes looked up impatiently.

“Please, sir, the person as brought that note is waiting for an answer.”

“Did I not say I would not be disturbed? Who is it?”

“A woman, sir. I tried hard to put her off; but she said she knew you were at home.”

With a gesture of annoyance, Bernardin broke the seal. As he did so his expression changed.

“Say I will come directly. Bring in wine and biscuits.”

Greatly astonished at this unexpected answer, the man-servant withdrew to execute his commission; while, turning to his daughter, with ill-concealed embarrassment of voice and manner, Mr. Hayes observed—

“I may be engaged some time. Mr. Stuart, Captain Hargraves, and Sir Desborough Denton dine here to-night. You had better ask Mrs. and Miss Ross ; they will be glad enough to come, and their presence will make things much pleasanter for you. It is too late to put the men off now. Only be careful that nothing transpires. If I am not greatly mistaken, Sir Frederick will keep his own counsel, and leave us to publish the news.”

Mrs. and Miss Ross were ladies in reduced circumstances, patronized by Mr. and Miss Hayes, as convenient persons to fill up a vacant place at a dinner-party, on the shortest possible notice.

Marion's breath came quick, and her colour rose ; but she acquiesced without remark, and retired to her boudoir, ostensibly to write the necessary note of invitation. She did not remain there many minutes.

Her curiosity was roused, and she determined, at all hazards, to see this woman whom the servants did not choose to call a lady, but who evidently possessed some secret influence to which her father was obliged to yield.

Hastily rearranging her hair she gave the notes to Elise, and went down to the dining-room, to wait the appearance of the mysterious stranger. The time seemed an age to her impatience. At length the drawing-room bell rang: a quick step was heard descending the stairs, and the next moment a sallow, hard-featured woman, dressed in deep mourning, and apparently about sixty years of age, crossed the hall.

They met half way. The haughty glance of the heiress was returned with interest; and, as the door closed behind the unwelcome visitor, she muttered to herself—

“So, that is Mr. Hayes’s other daughter. Beautiful as an angel, and no doubt his idol. Things gain by contrast. It is well. My task is easier. There is a very fair field for Margaret Nicholson’s revenge.”





CHAPTER XVI.

THE AMUSEMENTS OF A MAN OF FASHION.

BOUT a fortnight after the occurrences noticed in the preceding chapter, Sir Desborough Denton was leaning lazily over his solitary breakfast-table, alternately sipping his coffee and glancing at the papers.

Presently he turned to the second column in the *Times*, which that morning was headed by the following paragraph—

“If this should meet the eye of Edith M—— she is earnestly entreated to send her present address to X. Z., Post-office, L——. A once insurmountable barrier has

been providentially removed. Silence is now needlessly cruel."

As L—— was the nearest post town to Donnington, and Sir Desborough himself had frequently had recourse to its accommodating secrecy, it may be readily surmised that he read the above with more than ordinary interest. A little farther down was the following brief appeal—

"Netta to Willie. Do come or write. Our little stock of money is nearly all gone, and Harry wants a new dress. Yours ever."

For a moment his countenance softened.

"Ah! Netta knows her power. Well, I suppose I must go. Yet if it were not for her noble boy, I should break that link like a hundred others."

"Ha! What is this?" he muttered, as, laying down the *Times*, he took up another of the daily papers, which his servant had

just brought in. It was a paragraph in the *Morning Post*.

“Bernardin Hayes, Esq., and Miss Marion Hayes left London yesterday for Paris, *en route* for Italy. It is rumoured that the marriage which had been arranged to take place between Miss Hayes and Sir Frederick Morton, Bart., is broken off.”

Sir Desborough's features were contracted by an ominous frown. With a suppressed oath he left the table, and strode furiously up and down the room.

“Foiled, by Heaven! And I would have given half my fortune for revenge. How could the girl be such a fool as to let a match like that slip through her fingers? It is not her father's doing; infernal old humbug as he is, he knows his own interest. This sudden trip to Italy is a ruse, I'll warrant. They have kept it uncommonly quiet. I wonder if anything else is in the wind?”

Leaving the angry Baronet to digest his annoyance, we will turn for awhile to the Rectory at Oxenten.

There breakfast was long since over; but the Rector, indulging himself, as he was wont to do, for an hour or so after every meal, still leant back in his easy chair absorbed in the perusal of a spirited "leader," while his wife, by way of assisting his labours, conned the advertisement sheet with feminine perseverance. Presently she looked up eagerly.

"Oh, Robert, I do believe here is something about Sir Frederick Morton. L—— is the nearest post town to Donnington, I know by his letter to you last week; and if he is determined to get news of Edith, he may think (since you refuse to give him any information) the only way is to advertise in the *Times*. It must be so; only see. The name and all correspond."

“As I am unable to give him any information, you should say, my dear,” quietly interposed the Rector, as he relinquished his “leader” to look over the paragraph. “Under the circumstances I cannot help feeling it is, perhaps, well that poor Edith has left us in such complete ignorance of her movements.”

As he read, Mr. Seagraves became very thoughtful.

“I fear there is little doubt of its being Sir Frederick himself, though the only real clue is the name of the post town nearest his place. The rest is nothing. There are many Ediths. Besides, I believe half the advertisements in that column are cleverly-worded notices of danger to members of the thieving community.”

“What an idea!”

“A pretty correct one I am afraid, Nelly. However, I was not thinking of such a solu-

tion in the present case. There is a touch of truth about it which makes me reluctant to believe that Sir Frederick (if really it proceeds from him) is as unprincipled as some parts of his conduct would lead us to infer. Do you observe this—‘a once insurmountable barrier has been providentially removed?’”

“Yes, but I do not understand it. Unless he means to imply that he has broken off his engagement to Miss Hayes. In either case, he must have behaved very ill.”

“Well, you may depend there is more in it than lies on the surface. Events of painful interest seem crowding one upon another in our quiet little village. I did not like to tell you at first, fearing you might be annoyed—Lord Oxenten has written to inform me that he has placed his child under Sir Frederick’s guardianship.

The boy is already at the Grange. I always thought in event of his being again obliged to go abroad, he would have left Lord Dunorven with us."

"Strange. He did not mention it when he called to bid us good-bye."

"Perhaps he had not then made the arrangement, or was unwilling to speak of what he must have known would be likely to give me pain. However, it is useless to regret what cannot be altered. I must ask you, Nelly, to go and see Walter Ealing. I fear he will never get over his disappointment. He is sadly out of health, and, as his mother tells me, spends half his time at Maggie Nicholson's grave. The trials of affection seem to me more sad than any other. They lie deeper, and even when understood are almost always beyond the reach of sympathy. I wish you would call there at once. Poor Mrs. Ealing is

terribly depressed, and a kind word may cheer her. Besides, I think they really require help. Walter has given up work for months."

"I will go down before luncheon. By-the-by, I must look in at the school, and shall take Willie Grey to carry my basket. The little fellow has been quite melancholy ever since Edith went away. I miss that girl more and more; she was so kind to the children, and took so much of the parish work off my hands. I begin to hate the sound of Sir Frederick's name."

"Hush, Nelly. If he has done wrong, the wrong will bring its own punishment."

"I know that, but I cannot help wishing he had never come here. Don't you?"

"Well, perhaps I do."

"And then I begin to feel anxious about Edith. The time seems so long. I wish she would write."

“So do I, but, my dear wife, you must recollect the assurance of her last letter, that if ever any new trouble came upon her she would at once write and ask our assistance. We may, therefore, conclude that she is well.”

Between twelve and one that morning Sir Desborough Denton, attended by a servant, rode rapidly through a little village about ten miles from London. At the last house in an irregular kind of street, a small inn, bearing the primitive sign of the Plough, he dismounted, and consigning his horse to the care of the groom, turned down a winding lane a few yards farther to the left. After walking nearly three-quarters of a mile he came in sight of a cottage, railed off some twenty paces from the road, with a flower garden and gravel walk in front. He had scarcely reached the gate when a young girl of rather diminutive

stature, and apparently not more than nineteen, sprang hastily from her seat in the window, and ran out to meet him.

“Well, Netta.”

“Oh, Willie, I thought you would never come.”

“Then you thought wrong, little woman. Why, I only had your message at ten o’clock this morning. Where is our boy?”

Netta joyfully led the way. Sir Desborough’s left hand rested on her shoulder; she drew it closely round, pressing it to her lips like a caressing child.

In the little sitting-room, which for the style of house was luxuriously furnished, stood a princely boy. At his mother’s voice he laid down the wooden horse, whose legs he had just succeeded in breaking, and, recognising the new comer, rushed to him with a cry of delight. Sir

Desborough lifted the little fellow from the ground and kissed him with passionate fondness. The worst characters have some common sympathy, some point of contact with their kind. The confirmed roué, the selfish worldling, who, in pursuance of his own base pleasures, seldom spared a man, and never a woman, loved, nay, idolized his child, and for the child's sake continued to protect the mother.

There were moments of parental tenderness when he almost wished he had privately married her, so that he might eventually be able to acknowledge that boy as his heir. Such thoughts were, however, evanescent. Sir Desborough Denton was a confirmed sensualist, and wherever sensuality gets the upper hand it systematically roots out every deeper and holier feeling.

Four years previous to the date we are describing, while passing a linendraper's

shop in a country town, the gay Baronet's attention was attracted by a pretty fair-haired girl, who blushed with confused pleasure as she met the glance of the handsome stranger. Amused at her coquettish manner, and the half-shy, half-voluptuous expression of her eyes, he watched her into the shop, and then stood for some moments irresolutely twirling his moustache. At length having made up his mind he walked on a little distance and then came back, under pretence of purchasing a tie. To his satisfaction the pretty maiden herself stood behind the counter, her quick smile and tell-tale colour giving proof that he was welcome. The tie was difficult to choose ; other articles were asked for, all of which occupied some time in selection. Meanwhile Sir Desborough improved his opportunity, and gradually drew from the blushing girl enough of the state of her feelings

to convince him that the game was his own. Anna Lindsay was an orphan, little more than fifteen, the niece of the proprietors, and not particularly well-treated by them. A brief thought as to the expense, and her ruin was sealed. He took apartments in the neighbourhood, and contrived to see her again and again. The result may be imagined.

One night after dark, when the shop was closed, and most of the household were asleep, Sir Desborough met his easily-won prey at the corner of the street, where a post-chaise was in waiting. She was pure to him, sufficiently pretty to gratify his passion, and so thoroughly childlike and unsophisticated that, with very little trouble, he could mould her to his purpose. "Surely Netta loved him. She would not wish to go back to her old drudgery?" Where unsustained by a higher Power, the weak

must bend to the strong, and Netta's was one of those soft, ductile natures, well-nigh as yielding and impressionable under the forceful grasp of circumstance as metal in the hand of the artisan. For a wonder, Sir Desborough did not appear to repent his bargain, and, after the first year, the growing strength and beauty of his infant boy kept him tolerably constant. He was never cold or unkind to Netta, although he occasionally left her many weeks alone, and seldom prolonged his visits beyond two or three days. As she was profoundly ignorant of his numerous affairs of gallantry, and only knew him under the assumed name of Ravensworth, which he generously allowed her to share, it may be that Netta (whose perceptions of right and wrong were naturally cloudy) rather congratulated herself than otherwise on her equivocal position. In the first place, she had nothing to do,

consequently felt herself a "lady;" in the second, she had a comfortable home, a kind old servant to wait on her, and, as a rule, plenty of money to spend on herself and her boy. If "Willie" ever remained absent an unreasonable length of time an appeal in the "Ladies' Advertising Column" (he never suffered her to write to him), with some pointed allusion to Harry, generally sufficed to insure her a visit, or, at any rate, a seasonable present. In many respects, Netta's simple and frivolous nature gave her great advantage with a disposition like Sir Desborough's. She never worried him, nor attempted to assume authority in trifles; and he knew too much of women not to be well aware that, judging by his fellows, a man, though he may be as rich as Croesus, finds it a difficult task to keep his mistress in good-humour.

To resume the thread of our narrative.

The caresses of his child gradually soothed Sir Desborough's ruffled temper, and he had partially forgotten his recent annoyance, when, as he sat by the window playing with the boy's curly hair, while Netta busied herself in superintending the preparations for an early dinner, an unforeseen incident suddenly changed the current of his thoughts, and sent him forth from the cottage in a tumult of excitement.

It was a clear bright day ; there had been a slight frost that morning, just enough to render walking agreeable ; and the air, though light and pure, was by no means unpleasantly cold. There were few houses in sight, and the immediate neighbourhood was little frequented, except by the village boys and labourers going to and returning from their work. Sir Desborough was sitting with his back towards the village, looking down the lane which led past the garden,

and wound considerably beyond it to the right. In this position nothing would escape him. He had not been there long when, between the windings of the leafless hedgerows, he saw a slight, girlish figure dressed in deep mourning. His curiosity was excited by the undefined impression of familiarity with a person's walk, which sometimes strikes us when too far off to distinguish either form or feature. Presently doubt became certainty; it was Minnie Brooks.

See her he must and would. To follow her then, was his only chance; he knew the road; it would be impossible to miss her between the cottage and the village inn; but there was no time to lose. With ready invention he turned to Netta.

"I find I have left some papers at the Plough; I must go and see about them.

Perhaps I may be able to stay longer than I intended."

Netta was too much delighted at this information to spare a thought for anything unpleasant, and snatching his hat from the stand Sir Desborough hurried off, calling out as he closed the gate—

"I shall be back as soon as I can."

Minnie was still in sight. With a few vigorous strides he might have overtaken her, but he first wanted to find out where she was going, and, if possible, what she was doing in that neighbourhood. She had evidently left the shelter of the Grange ; and his smile brightened in anticipation of a success that he felt to be already within reach.

Passing the Plough, Minnie turned to the right ; then, crossing to the other side, entered a narrow lane, at the end of which stood the village post-office. Between that

and the main street was a broad, uninhabited space. Sir Desborough instantly divined her errand; she would probably return the same way; in hope of which favourable conjuncture, he involuntarily slackened his pace in the most secluded part of the road. It was as he had anticipated. After posting her letter, Minnie began to retrace her steps, apparently lost in thought; her eyes were fixed mournfully on the ground, and she nearly ran against Sir Desborough, before she was aware of his presence: he observed this abstraction with delight, and the melancholy that overspread her features did not escape him. His brain was on fire. Her modest beauty (to him she seemed more beautiful than ever); her evident depression, telling him so plainly that her heart still held his image; quenched every touch of mercy and compunction in the thrill of unholy triumph.

At last! As his tall shadow came between her and the sun, Minnie unconsciously moved a little farther to the right. Raising her eyes she started convulsively. Even Sir Desborough was hardly prepared for the expression of wild terror in that pale, beseeching face. His resolution was taken; he would acknowledge his former error, and propose honourable marriage, trusting to his own after ingenuity to get out of the scrape. Let her once believe him in earnest; her love for him would do the rest.

“Minnie, dear Minnie! In pity do not shrink from me thus. Can’t you forgive me? You little think how miserable I have been; how I have cursed my folly and ingratitude; how I have longed to see you again to do you justice, to feel myself forgiven! Ah,” he continued, narrowly watching the effect of his words, “I have given you a right, a perfect right to hate me.”

“Hate *you*?” murmured poor Minnie, her eyes filling with tears.

Though inwardly congratulating himself, Sir Desborough preserved the same studied sadness of demeanour.

“Will you always judge me by what has been? Is my repentance of no value in your eyes?”

“Pray don’t, Sir Desborough, you distress me,” interrupted Minnie, almost choking with the effort to speak calmly; while the tears she was no longer able to restrain fell freely.

In seasons of temptation, who listens is lost. Step by step, Sir Desborough felt that he was gaining.

“Yes, Minnie, one cannot do more than repent. If you were once my wife, I could turn over a new leaf.”

No lie so dangerous as that which bears the semblance of truth; no deception so

darkly delusive as that which feeling and affection alike prompt us to believe. It is a painful fact that love, notwithstanding its heavenly origin, is too often the strongest shaft in the Destroyer's quiver.

Minnie paused, and trembled as if gathering strength for a last effort. They had changed places. He against whose terrible passion she had so long sought protection, now stood humbly before her, as she thought, conscience-stricken and ashamed.

“Say you forgive me?”

“Yes, yes.”

Words that came forth low and faltering, to be welcomed by well-counterfeited thankfulness. It was enough for the present. The last act of that infernal tragedy was in reserve. Craft, the spurious sister of Prudence, can almost always summon discretion to her aid. He would not ask too much.

“I will not detain you ; only promise to see me once more.”

Minnie shook her head sorrowfully.

Then came a string of protestations, perilous from their simulated truth. After a little dexterous manœuvring, Sir Desborough succeeded in drawing from her an admission that she was residing in the village ; and a half promise that she would meet him the next day, as he phrased it, “in token of forgiveness.”

When they parted, he turned into the Plough, to give some orders to his servant, and then, with difficulty repressing his exultation, made the best of his way to the cottage, being anxious to avoid any questioning from Netta.

Strange that as his eye rested on the fair face before him, still bright with all the freshness of youth—he should be struck by the impression of a something wanting!

The nameless vacuum that nature and philosophy abhor, where that which should be is not.

His breath had rifled what, libertine as he was, he knew to be woman's greatest charm.

Who values a soiled flower?





CHAPTER XVII.

MRS. LAWRENCE TOUCHES ON AN UNPLEASANT
SUBJECT.

INNIE returned home in a state of painful incertitude. The finding of the mysterious locket, and the significant circumstance that it was followed by the breaking off of Sir Frederick's engagement, were alike, for the time, forgotten. Sir Desborough's well-assumed penitence had secured that which no amount of entreaty would otherwise have been able to obtain—a favourable hearing. Having done all he could to make amends for the past, was it her duty to drive him to despair?

Now that he sought her in honourable marriage, telling her with such touching eloquence that her influence alone could make him a better and a wiser man ; that, without her, he was reckless, how could she resist his entreaty ? Poor Minnie, so ready in her single-minded affection to set about the Herculean task of reforming a libertine ! Must the awakening come too late ?

The remainder of the day passed heavily. Mrs. Lawrence, who had taken a great fancy to her young companion, observed her swollen eyelids and evident depression with considerable uneasiness, and at last asked whether anything had occurred to distress her.

“I have a very bad headache,” replied Minnie, evasively.

“Dear, dear ! then why did you read to me so long ? My good child, I do wish you would treat me as a friend. Your duties

here are merely nominal. I shall not be able to enjoy anything you do for me, if you will persist in working when you are not well. Lady Morton told me you were delicate."

"Is Lady Morton well?" inquired Minnie, timidly, feeling that she must say something, and anxious to divert the conversation from herself.

"Quite well, my dear. I heard from her this morning. They are all rather in a state of discomfort, partly owing, I should imagine, to the sudden breaking off of Sir Frederick's intended marriage. You knew it, of course?"

"I fancied it was broken off; though no one told me; it was only implied."

"Ah, you must have been there some days after Miss Hayes left. Lady Morton says very little about it. I am very sorry for them all. Such a disappointment!"

What Minnie knew she was inclined to keep to herself; and Mrs. Lawrence, who among her few faults numbered that of an inordinate love of talking, continued—

“Sir Frederick is so truly noble-hearted.”

“He is indeed. I can never be sufficiently grateful to him for all his kindness to my poor grandfather.”

And then Minnie, glad of a subject on which she could enlarge, began to relate various instances of Donnington benevolence, amongst which Sir Frederick’s goodness to the old farmer formed the central point of interest.

“Yes; he is a dear, good man, my son’s best and kindest friend,” rejoined the amiable widow, her eyes filling with tears at the thought of all they owed him. “I grieve to hear that Lady Morton thinks it necessary he should have a thorough change. She says he is not at all well, and yet nothing

will induce him to leave home. I can imagine it must have been a bitter mortification to lose his bride on the very eve of their marriage. Such a beautiful creature too! I never saw any one so lovely; she looked born to be a queen. I suppose it was partly her own fault, though Sir Frederick is too generous to let her be blamed. Probably they had a disagreement between themselves, and were both too proud to make it up. Did you ever see Sir Desborough Denton while you were at Donnington?"

"I have seen him," returned Minnie, in a voice so hollow that Mrs. Lawrence must have remarked it, had she not been entirely engrossed by her own thoughts.

"My son and I always thought that he would marry Miss Hayes," continued the widow, not without some inward misgiving that John would be seriously displeased with her for speaking of what did not con-

cern either of them, and, above all, for bringing in his name. "They appeared very well suited to each other. He was a strikingly handsome man, much handsomer than Sir Frederick."

Minnie's nerves were strung to agony, but the dread of discovery made her mechanically acquiesce in Mrs. Lawrence's opinion. To her infinite relief, the good lady, who in conversational matters had something of the butterfly in her nature, soon started a new topic.

"What sort of a child is that baby? Lord——What is his name?"

"Lord Dunorven, Lord Oxenten's heir. An exceedingly pretty boy, with large dark eyes and a clear complexion. I do not think he is a year old yet; but he is wonderfully intelligent, and takes more notice than many English children double his age."

“English children! What, is not Lord Oxenten an Englishman?”

“Yes; but he married an Italian lady, and her child was born in her own country. Lord Dunorven’s foster-mother is also an Italian, and I should fancy a very nice woman; only she speaks such queer English, and is constantly talking of the saints and the angels.”

“Ah, a Roman Catholic. I am glad to hear Miss Morton’s health continues to improve; she appears to take great interest in Lord Oxenten’s child. Do you know how long he is likely to remain under Sir Frederick’s care?”

“Bianca said Lord Oxenten told her he should be away some months, and probably a year.”

“Who is Bianca?”

“The Italian foster-mother or nurse, as I suppose we should call her in England. I

saw a good deal of her during the short time I remained at the Grange after her arrival. She used to say she liked to talk to me, because——”

“Well?”

“She said my voice reminded her of her dear mistress, the late Countess,” replied Minnie, vexed at having been betrayed into a momentary egotism.





CHAPTER XVIII.

TELLS HOW JOHN LAWRENCE LISTENED TO A CON-
VERSATION NOT MEANT FOR HIM TO HEAR.

HE next morning, at half-past eleven, having requested Netta to see that dinner was ready by a certain hour, Sir Desborough left the cottage. As during the first months of their intimacy he had been in the habit of riding and walking without once permitting her to accompany him, this occasioned no remark. Not wishing to be needlessly early, he contrived to reach the place of meeting about three minutes before the appointed time. A few minutes later Minnie made her appearance at the end of the long lane.

Sir Desborough's hot temperament would scarcely allow him sufficient self-command to play the rôle of a hypocrite, so as to carry out the deception he had planned. He dared not approach her too eagerly, lest his impassioned manner should arouse her suspicions. The pretty dove was already fluttering into the toils. One stroke of policy on his part, one moment of weakness on hers, let him only succeed in persuading her to trust herself to his honour, under a promise of getting a licence on the morrow, and the game was his own.

Minnie advanced timidly. She was very pale; her sweet mouth quivered, and her large melancholy eyes fixed themselves on Sir Desborough with an expression which, hardened villain as he was, almost unmanned him. Touchingly beautiful in her deep mourning dress, her long lashes fringing the soft cheek, to which the suffering she

had undergone had imparted a violet tinge ; taller, slighter than when he first met her in the pride of her young loveliness, like a rosy wood-nymph in the solitude of Donnington ; sorrowful, saddened by her love for him (there lay the charm), she was infinitely more winning, more refined, more attractive to his pampered and fastidious senses.

Time passed rapidly. The old story of miscalled love was eloquently told ; closer and closer pressed the tempter ; it was almost an even chance, when a third person, unseen by either of the speakers, came briskly down the lane. A tall gentleman-like man, with brown hair and whiskers, large penetrating blue eyes and a face which, though by no means handsome, bore the impress of a lofty character.

It was John Lawrence.

Two days before he had received an unexpected visit from an old college friend

to whom he had once rendered an essential service. Anxious in part to repay a debt of gratitude, Mr. Merriman volunteered to take charge of the church and the parish while the Vicar spent a fortnight with his mother. Mrs. Lawrence's letter only gave the name of the farmhouse where she was lodging. The village itself was scattered, though not large; patches of houses in opposite directions, two or three miles apart, being considered to belong to the same locality. Yet there was but one street. Mr. Lawrence had inquired his way more than once, but, either from carelessness or absence of mind, he took the wrong turning, and this providential error brought him down the unfrequented road, where stood Minnie and Sir Desborough.

He came forward with a light, springy step; no trace of fatigue in feature or movement, though he had walked all the

way from London. They could not see him; their faces were turned another way, and both were too much pre-occupied to be aware of his approach. With a start of surprise he recognised Sir Desborough, not at first his companion, whom it must be remembered he had scarcely ever seen. It was the one word "Minnie," pronounced by her false lover in tones of impassioned tenderness, that rooted him to the spot, hardly conscious what he was doing in thus involuntarily listening to a conversation not meant for him to hear.

A flush of indignation overspread his countenance as he caught the full import of the Baronet's pleading. Passing quickly, a few paces farther on he turned so as to confront them both.

Minnie coloured in confusion, though she had no personal recollection of the intruder. Sir Desborough was inexpressibly annoyed,

but he endeavoured to preserve the semblance of good humour.

“Ha, Lawrence! How are you? Who would have thought of seeing you here?”

Mr. Lawrence was not to be so easily put off. Slightly raising his hat to Minnie, he eyed her false-hearted suitor with a stern scrutiny.

“I am sufficiently acquainted with Miss Brooks’s history to know that she is an orphan without any near relations. I am also aware that she is staying with my mother, and must, therefore, be excused for interfering in a matter which may not appear to concern me. Sir Desborough, it is right that I should tell you I overheard part of what you said just now. Without entering into the necessity of a private marriage—if such is your intention—the kindest thing I can do for you both will be to join your

hands myself, and keep the secret inviolate until such time as you think proper to reveal it. Under any circumstances—understand me fully—Miss Brooks does not leave the shelter of my mother's roof until she leaves it for the protection of a husband. Have I your sanction?" he added, turning to Minnie, who, horrified at discovery by the son of her protectress, shrank away from her companion and became very pale. "Have I your sanction?" Unable to reply, she bent her head in token of assent.

"Insolent!" thundered Sir Desborough, rendered furious by the significant fact that Minnie had already left his side, and was standing at some little distance in a state of bewildered agitation. "Insolent! This to *me*! You had better learn to mind your own affairs instead of playing eavesdropper and meddler in those of others."

Mr. Lawrence's colour rose at the in-

jurious epithets, and for an instant his eye flashed fire. However, he controlled himself and returned calmly—

“I am merely doing my duty as a man of honour and a clergyman.”

“Clergy be ——,” muttered Sir Desborough between his teeth, losing step by step the ground that he had won so hardly ; for Minnie, terrified by his violence, instinctively drew nearer to the Vicar. “Mr. Lawrence, by the heaven above us, you shall answer this impertinence ! Our former intercourse will not stand you in stead.”

He raised his cane in a menacing attitude. A slight, scarcely perceptible smile hovered round the mouth of the young clergyman.

“I am willing to answer it either here or hereafter, but not in the way you intend. Sir Desborough, I have no wish to quarrel with you. If all you have said to Miss

Brooks is truth, and you are prepared to make her your wife before God and man, write to me within a fortnight. I promise you the hard terms you have applied to me shall be forgotten, as they are even now forgiven. I will meet you when and where you please ; see to all needful arrangements, and keep your secret as long as you think proper. Should I *not* hear from you, I shall conclude, and another will be at liberty to conclude also, that you have changed your mind. There is my card with the address of my mother. Miss Brooks, you will allow me the pleasure of seeing you to our lodgings, but, as I do not know where they are, I must put myself under your guidance."

Sir Desborough took the card mechanically ; indeed, however great his irritation, he could not well do otherwise. Minnie's large melancholy eyes were fixed on him

with a look of anxious inquiry. What could he say to her? How contrive to carry out the rôle of hypocrisy which circumstances had thus rendered futile? Snatching her hand, which she did not attempt to withdraw, he held it for a moment in a passionate clasp, inwardly cursing his ill-luck, and burning with rage against the man whose ingenious importunity had driven him to this dilemma.

At length, with an effort, he allowed her to pass. As Mr. Lawrence was preparing to follow, the disappointed libertine glared at him with vindictive hatred.

“You shall repent this yet.”

“Time will show. Events are not ours. I would not willingly wrong any man, but I must do what I feel to be my duty.”

Sir Desborough’s deep-voiced oath was lost in air. Minnie Brooks and her self-constituted protector were already beyond

hearing. He stood there alone, with a craving worthy a famished tiger, foiled in the moment of anticipated conquest, and wildly thirsting for revenge on the man who had foiled him.





CHAPTER XIX.

THE VICAR OF F—— HAS A SUSPICION THAT
IN PRACTISING KNIGHT-ERRANTRY HE HAS
BURNT HIS OWN FINGERS.



ENJOYING the dolce far niente? How well you are looking!"

It was a cheerful, manly voice, well suited to the face and form of the speaker. With an exclamation of delight Mrs. Lawrence started from the low couch on which she had been reclining.

"My boy, my dear boy! How did you come?"

"In the first place I walked, which has given me an appetite. In the second——"

“Yes, of course, you must be hungry. I will order luncheon directly. But, John, you know I did not mean that. You cannot have walked all the way from F——. Why, you said you should not be able to get away this Christmas. Do tell me all about it.”

“You want the whole story. Well, then, the day before yesterday, Harry Merrivan came down unexpectedly, having, as he declared, nothing better to do; and directly he heard that we were unable to be together on account of your health, he good-naturedly insisted on taking my duties for a fortnight, so that I might spend Christmas with you. I did not write because I wanted to surprise you. Indeed, there was scarcely time. I came up by an early train, left my bag in charge of the carrier, and walked from London. When I got here everybody pretended to know where you lived, but no

one directed me right ; until, after prowling about for nearly an hour, I was fortunate enough to meet Miss Brooks, and, as you see, came to hand under her guidance."

"Ah, you knew her at Donnington ! Did she come in with you ?"

"I believe so. She disappeared somewhere on the stairs, after showing me to your door, which I was rude enough to enter unannounced. What a queer old rambling place this is ! I rather like a farmhouse."

He spoke lightly, laying his arm caressingly across the back of her chair ; yet an undefined something in his tone made Mrs. Lawrence look at him inquiringly. There was a smile on the lip, but the clear blue eyes were far away, gazing on vacancy. The transient emotion soon passed. In another moment he turned round with an amused laugh.

“Studying, eh? Well, mother, what have you discovered? Is impenetrable Jack more readable than he used to be?”

This was a schoolboy sobriquet, which, with some show of justice, had clung to him through life. Notwithstanding his frank manner no one was ever known to possess the key to his really reserved, self-contained nature, not even his mother, though he invariably treated her with the tenderest affection.

“I hardly know my own thoughts, John, much less yours,” rejoined the widow, with an answering smile. “How brown you are still! I thought it would all wear off in the winter.”

“Better not. I am rather proud of my rusticity. Thank God, I am quite well now; well and strong; strong to bear, to do, and——”

“To suffer” rose to his lips, but died in

the utterance. Strange that in those moments of quiet thankfulness he felt as though the hour of suffering drew near, so near that he could not afford to brave it. When luncheon was brought in he had lost his appetite, and though he tried hard to shake it off, the nameless incubus weighed down his spirits like a nightmare.

Minnie did not make her appearance. She had not been well for some days, and excused herself on the plea of headache. After luncheon Mrs. Lawrence went to look after her, leaving her son at leisure to reproach himself for his unwarrantable folly. He had been practising knight-errantry to some purpose. Where was the calm content with which he had started that morning? the thankful appreciation of his altered circumstances, which had cast a sunshine over everything around him? Lost in a whirl of excitement, the source of which he

was ashamed to acknowledge, conscious of his own weakness, uneasy at Minnie's indisposition, afraid to ask the most commonplace question lest he should convey an impression of more than ordinary interest, the Vicar of F—— almost wished himself at home.

At length he resolved to write a letter to Sir Frederick, giving him an account of all that had transpired.

Poor Minnie ! Day succeeded day in wearisome and fruitless expectation. Whatever his errors in the past, she could not, she would not, believe that Sir Desborough again intended to deceive her ; that even his repentance was assumed. Something unforeseen must have occurred to prevent his writing. A note would come to-morrow to chide her fears and explain the delay. The morrow came and passed with the same dull weight of disappointment, and still she

hoped—for hope, which is born of love, will feed on its ashes. She would have patience, and wait—wait, that cold hard word which might be found engraven on so many weary hearts! Mr. Lawrence watched her pale cheek and faltering step with indignant commiseration; and his brow grew dark—dark even in sympathy, as he thought of the wealth of affection thus poured upon the sand.

Minnie had greatly improved during her stay at the Grange. Though nominally left to the housekeeper's charge she was more frequently with Lady Morton, and her gentle nature seemed formed to receive higher impressions. She had had—for her station in life—a very good education; and the softness of demeanour inseparable from loveliness when joined with timidity, made it difficult to believe in the inferiority of her origin. Perhaps, too, her intercourse with

Sir Desborough had insensibly filled in those delicate touches which we are pleased to term good-breeding. Like most men of his stamp he possessed the grace and fictitious polish of society in the highest degree; his address to women, of whatever station, was exceedingly attractive; and it may be that, as he always treated Minnie like a lady, she unconsciously adopted the part which he assigned to her.

Mrs. Lawrence, who did full justice to Minnie's power of fascination, was somewhat perplexed by her son's unexpected visit. From prudential motives she would fain have arranged it differently. When thrown into close contact with one so lovely, the unrestrained intercourse of every-day life might prove dangerous to a disengaged man. For a moment she almost wished she could make some excuse to get rid of her interesting companion, but the ungenerous thought

passed as she noticed the outward reserve of the young people towards each other. They seldom spoke beyond the customary "good morning" and "good night," so that at last, having watched them for some days with a similar result, the good lady's vigilance relaxed. As far as she was able to judge, "John" had evidently no idea of "falling in love," and Minnie seemed anxious to avoid being in his presence. Indeed, the impossibility of cultivating cheerfulness under the pressure of suspense, made the orphan only too glad to be alone; and Mrs. Lawrence (when all fear on her son's account had vanished), yielding to her natural kindheartedness, began to feel and express great concern on account of her protégée's ill health.

"I cannot bear to see that poor girl looking so ill."

"I beg your pardon, mother. Were you speaking to me?" said Mr. Lawrence, laying

down the paper which he had been reading, or pretending to read.

“Minnie Brooks seems far from well. Don't you think so?”

“I—why? Perhaps this place does not suit her?”

“Surely it cannot be unhealthy! It is not a clay soil, is it, John? And now I recollect somebody told me they had scarlet fever here in the autumn. That is a proof of unhealthiness, isn't it? Fevers generally lie low, don't they?”

“I am no judge of such matters, mother,” replied the Vicar, again burying himself in the *Times*, and looking very much as if he did not care to listen.

“Poor child! What am I to do for those terrible headaches? I have already used all my sal-volatile.”

“Send for some more,” said John Lawrence, drily.

“Yes; but it doesn’t seem to do her any good. Lady Morton told me she had never recovered the shock of her grandfather’s death. And yet she seemed tolerably well the first few days. I suppose it is the reaction.”

It was fortunate that Mrs. Lawrence took as much delight in nursing others as in being nursed and cosseted herself; so that Minnie’s uncomplaining delicacy was a sure key to her interest. Finding her son apparently disinclined to converse, and unwilling to disturb him while he was reading the paper, she went upstairs, where, in spite of an acknowledged headache, she found her young charge busily engaged in needle-work.

Determined not to give way, the unfortunate girl sought to divert her mind, and shorten the period of uncertainty by incessant occupation.

As his mother left the room, John Lawrence started from his seat.

“Fool that I am!” he murmured. “I, who always deemed myself above such weakness, and ridiculed the notion of that sympathy at first sight, that mysterious attraction without reason or foundation, which the world calls love! I know her heart is another’s. And that other! I dare not think of *him*, lest I forget my office and call down curses on the heads of all who, like him, seek to betray the defenceless. Why should a priceless boon be given to one so utterly worthless? And I—and I—— Oh, God! it is very hard.”

He sat down again, covering his face with his hands.

“This must not continue. I had better go home at once. But I cannot. I promised to wait the fortnight, though of course he will not write; I never expected

he would. Yet I must stay to undeceive her, to protect her, if need be. Oh, Minnie, Minnie!"

And the strong, self-sustained, cold, imperturbable John Lawrence, he whom no man, and certainly no woman, would ever have accused of sensibility, fairly broke down.

The closing day of the second week arrived, and still no letter.

Minnie came down to make breakfast as usual, no trace of emotion on her sweet colourless face, though she had passed a sleepless night, and her fond trust in Sir Desborough's repentance was gradually giving way. There was yet another chance. The postman seemed to be unusually late. Twice she glanced anxiously at the door. It was merely the servant with hot milk and rolls. At length the letters were brought in.

Two for Mrs. Lawrence, and—— Yes, there was one for the Vicar.

Trembling with excitement, Minnie bent down behind the tea-urn. It was her last hope. Each moment seemed to her an age. That terrible silence, broken only by the crackling of the fire or the fall of a discarded cinder, was almost more than she could bear. When would somebody speak?

Once she looked up. Mr. Lawrence was still engrossed by his letter. His stern, impenetrable countenance gave her no clue.

Presently Mrs. Lawrence finished reading.

“Is yours from Mr. Merrivan, John?”

“No.”

Minnie’s heart throbbed wildly. Mr. Lawrence was evidently desirous to keep the contents of his letter to himself.

“John, tell me. I want to know,” pursued the widow, laying her hand caress-

ingly on his arm. "Surely that is Sir Frederick's writing?"

Minnie held her breath in an agony of suspense, though hope's delusive star had already passed beyond the horizon of probability. Luckily Mrs. Lawrence could not see her face.

"It is," replied the Vicar, after a pause, speaking reluctantly and with effort.

"Do tell me, John."

Mr. Lawrence silently pointed to the private mark on the envelope, and then folding and replacing the letter sat for some minutes making a pretence of sipping his coffee.

"Are they all well?"

"I suppose so. Morton does not say."

Unable to gratify her curiosity, and feeling that it was useless to ask him any more questions, Mrs. Lawrence endeavoured to

get possession of the *Morning Post*, which, directed in Sir Frederick's handwriting, was lying by the young clergyman's plate.

There was a suppressed nervousness in his manner as he watched her carefully unfold it.

"I wish you would let me have that paper for an hour or so. You can look at it afterwards."

"Certainly, my dear boy. I did not know. It is your own, of course. I beg your pardon."

And the gentle-tempered widow, inwardly reflecting that "John" was rather odd, and wondering what could possibly be the reason, hurried over the remains of her breakfast, without bestowing a thought on anybody else.

And Minnie?

She did not faint or sob, no cry of

anguish escaped her ; she did not run away on the plea of sudden illness, as most girls in her position would have done, but sat quite still, pale, cold, motionless, save when Mrs. Lawrence required of her some trivial service, which she performed unconsciously, like one in a dream.

It was all gone then ? All ?

Her innocent mind was scarcely able to comprehend the depth of wickedness that, in the garb of virtue, could compass such a scheme, its object her ruin. It was like looking over the brink of a perilous steep into a waste of darkness studded with angry stars. She had been clinging to the rock of her own pure faith, and the huge wave of experience had carried her far back—beyond the breakers, it is true, but comfortless and alone. *He* had deceived her ; in whom should she trust ?

Mechanically she rose from the breakfast

table, put her chair back into its place, and rang the bell, resuming thus her daily avocations—the common calls of duty that come in one by one, to fill up the heart's great vacuum, and too often leave it as void and desolate as before. As she was closing the door of the sideboard Mr. Lawrence addressed his mother—

“It is my last day. I must take you for a walk. The weather is delightful, and not too cold. I am sure it will do you good. Can you get ready now?”

“Yes, dear, at once.”

She left the room, and Minnie was preparing to follow her when the Vicar, who had risen from his seat, laid a light touch on her arm. Drawing an easy chair to the table, he said, in an authoritative tone—

“Sit down.”

Then pointing to a short paragraph in the *Morning Post*, he watched her read it,

saw the mute, tearless agony in her face, and unable to bear it any longer rushed upstairs.

The paragraph was this—

“Sir Desborough Denton, Bart., left London yesterday *en route* for Genoa.”

END OF VOL. II.

TINSLEY BROTHERS' NEW BOOKS.

The Life of Madame Sevigne.

Madame de Sévigné, her Correspondents and Contemporaries. By the Comtesse DE PULIGA. 2 vols. 8vo, with Portraits. 30s.

Alexander of Russia, Saint Francis of Assisi,
Joseph de Maistre, &c.

Foreign Biographies. By WILLIAM MACCALL.
In 2 vols. 8vo. 25s.

The Life and Times of Algernon Sydney.

The Life and Times of Algernon Sydney, Republican, 1622-1683. By ALEXANDER CHARLES EWALD, F.S.A., Senior Clerk of Her Majesty's Public Records, Author of "The Crown and its Advisers," "Last Century of Universal History," &c. 2 vols. 8vo. 25s.

Recuerdos de Italia.

Old Rome and New Italy. By EMILIO CASTELAR.
Translated by Mrs. ARTHUR ARNOLD. 1 vol 8vo. 12s.

Beethoven, Handel, Haydn, Malibran, Mozart, &c.

Musical Recollections of the Last Half Century.
2 vols. 8vo. 25s.

"And music shall untune the sky."—*Dryden and Handel.*

Spirit Faces, Mediums, At a Dark Circle,
The Walworth Jumpers, &c.

Unorthodox London; or Phases of Religious
Life in the Metropolis. By the Rev. C. MAURICE DAVIES, D.D.
1 vol. 8vo. 14s.

Whitehurst's Napoleon the Third.

Court and Social Life in France under Napoleon
the Third. By the late FELIX WHITEHURST. 2 vols. 8vo. 25s.

Lord Lytton, C. R. Darwin, Dean Stanley, Right
Hon. B. Disraeli, &c.

Cartoon Portraits and Biographical Sketches of
Men of the Day. Containing 50 Portraits, with Short Biographical
Sketches of each. 1 handsome volume, cloth gilt. 21s.

The Shuttlecock Papers: a Book for an Idle
Hour. By J. ASHBY STERRY. 1 vol., crown 8vo. 7s. 6d.

Mount Sinai a Volcano. By CHARLES T. BEKE,
Ph.D., Author of "Origines Biblicæ," "The Idol in Horeb,"
"Jesus the Messiah," &c. 2s. 6d.

TINSLEY BROTHERS' NEW NOVELS,

AT ALL LIBRARIES.

“The Old Cross Quarry :” a New Novel. By
GERALD GRANT, Author of ‘Coming Home to Roost,’ 3 vols.

The Good Old Times : a New Novel. By
WILLIAM HARRISON AINSWORTH, Author of “Boscobel,” “Old
St. Paul’s,” “Rookwood,” “The Tower of London,” “The Miser’s
Daughter,” &c. In 3 vols.

The Earl’s Promise : a New Novel. By Mrs.
J. H. RIDDELL, Author of “Too Much Alone,” “George Geith,”
“City and Suburb,” “The Race for Wealth,” “A Life’s Assize,”
“Home, Sweet Home,” &c. In 3 vols.

The Squire’s Grandson : a Tale of a Strong
Man’s Weakness. By ROBERT ST. JOHN CORBET, Author of
“The Canon’s Daughters,” “Church and Wife,” &c. In 3 vols.

Robert Ord’s Atonement. A Novel. By the
Author of “Nellie’s Memories,” “Barbara Heathcote’s Trial,”
&c. In 3 vols.

Nor Love : Nor Lands. By the Author of
“Victory Deane,” “Valentine Forde,” &c. 3 vols.

A Pair of Blue Eyes. By the Author of
“Under the Greenwood Tree,” “Desperate Remedies,” &c. 3 vols.

“It is one of the most artistically constructed among recent novels; and from consideration affecting higher matters than mere construction, we would assign it a very high place among works of its class.”—*Saturday Review*.

“A really powerful story, well proportioned in its parts of varied and deep interest, yet not too harrowing for pleasure, relieved by exquisite touches of word-pictures, and supported by characters not too numerous to crowd the stage and divert us from an attentive study of the three central figures.”—*Spectator*.

Olivia’s Lovers. A New Novel. In 3 vols.

The Ringwoods of Ringwood : a New Novel.
By MERVYN MERRITON. In 3 vols.

By No Fault of Their Own : a New Novel. By
Miss TELFER. In 3 vols.

Nelly Dynisford : a New Novel. 3 vols.

“In the serene expression of her face, he read the Divine beatitude, Blessed are the pure in heart.”—*Longfellow*.

Coming Home ; or, Sithors to Grind. A Fire-
side Story (from which the Play, produced at the Globe Theatre,
London, July 5th, 1873, is adapted). By GEORGE RALPH WALKER.
In 1 vol.

A Hunt Cup; or, Loyalty before all : a Novelette.
By WAT BRADWOOD, Author of “O. V. H.,” “Ensemble,” &c.
In 1 vol.

TINSLEY BROTHERS'

SERIES OF SEVEN-AND-SIXPENNY WORKS.

HANDSOMELY BOUND IN BEVELLED BOARDS.

The Shuttlecock Papers: a Book for an Idle Hour. By J. ASHBY STERRY.

Poppies in the Corn; or, Glad Hours in the Grave Years. By the Author of "The Harvest of a Quiet Eye," &c.

The Pilgrim and the Shrine; or, Passages from the Life and Correspondence of Herbert Ainslie, B.A. Cantab.

Higher Law. A Romance in One Volume.

Moorland and Stream. By W. BARRY.

Maxims by a Man of the World. By the Author of "Lost Sir Massingberd."

The Adventures of a Bric-a-Brac Hunter. By Major BYNG HALL.

The Night Side of London. By J. EWING RITCHIE, Author of "About London," &c. New and Enlarged Edition.

Some Habits and Customs of the Working Classes. By a JOURNEYMAN ENGINEER.

The Great Unwashed. By "THE JOURNEYMAN ENGINEER." Uniform with "Some Habits and Customs of the Working Classes."

Sunnyside Papers. By ANDREW HALLIDAY.

Essays in Defence of Women. Crown 8vo, handsomely bound in cloth, gilt, bevelled boards.

Places and People; being Studies from the Life. By J. C. PARKINSON.

A Course of English Literature. By JAMES HANNAY.

The Law: What I have Seen, What I have Heard, and What I have Known. By CYRUS JAY.

Military Men I have Met. By E. DYNE FENTON, Author of "Sorties from Gib." With Twenty Illustrations.

"Captain Fenton, encouraged by the very favourable reception which, with hardly an exception, his first essay in military writing received, has wisely ventured on another volume, in which he sketches, with all the brevity, and not unfrequently with much of the wit, of Theophrastus, portraits of the military men he has met with in his military career. . . . The illustrations by Sambourne are excellent and laughter-moving."—*Bell's Weekly Messenger*.

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.

TINSLEY BROTHERS'

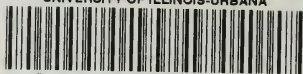
TWO-SHILLING VOLUMES.

In Illustrated Wrappers, at every Railway Stall, and of all Booksellers.

- THE YELLOW FLAG. By EDMUND YATES.
THE GOLDEN LION OF GRANPERE. By ANTHONY TROLLOPE.
UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE. A Rural Painting of the
Dutch School. By the Author of "Desperate Remedies," &c.
AT HIS GATES. By Mrs. OLIPHANT.
JOY AFTER SORROW. By Mrs. J. H. RIDDELL.
A WAITING RACE. By EDMUND YATES.
SAVED BY A WOMAN. By the Author of "No Appeal," &c.
THE HARVEYS. By HENRY KINGSLEY.
HORNBY MILLS; and other Stories. By the same.
OLD MARGARET. By the same.
LOVER AND HUSBAND. By ENNIS GRAHAM.
THE CAMBRIDGE FRESHMAN; or Memoirs of Mr. Golightly.
By MARTIN LEGRAND. With numerous Illustrations by Phiz.
UNDER WHICH KING? By B. W. JOHNSTON, M.P.
JOSHUA MARVEL. By B. L. FARJEON.
ANTEROS. By the Author of "Guy Livingstone."
PAPERS HUMOROUS AND PATHETIC. By GEORGE
AUGUSTUS SALA.
GASLIGHT AND DAYLIGHT. By GEORGE AUGUSTUS SALA.
GRIF. By B. L. FARJEON, Author of "Joshua Marvel," &c.
BROKEN TO HARNESS. By EDMUND YATES.
A PERFECT TREASURE. By the Author of "Lost Sir Mas-
singberd."
MY ENEMY'S DAUGHTER. By JUSTIN MCCARTHY.
A RIGHTED WRONG. By EDMUND YATES.
NETHERTON-ON-SEA. Edited by the late Dean of Canterbury.
LOVE STORIES OF THE ENGLISH WATERING-PLACES.
SANS MERCI. By the Author of "Guy Livingstone."
THE ADVENTURES OF DR. BRADY. By W. H. RUSSELL, LL.D.
BREAKING A BUTTERFLY. By Author of "Sans Merci."
BRAKESPEARE. By the same.
MAURICE DERING. By the same.
RECOMMENDED TO MERCY. By the Author of "Sink or
Swim?"
NOT WISELY, BUT TOO WELL. By the Author of "Cometh
up as a Flower."
THE WATERDALE NEIGHBOURS. By JUSTIN MCCARTHY.
THE PRETTY WIDOW. By CHARLES H. ROSS.
MISS FORRESTER. By the Author of "Archie Lovell."
BLACK SHEEP. By EDMUND YATES.
THE ROCK AHEAD. By the same.
BARREN HONOUR. By the Author of "Guy Livingstone."
SWORD AND GOWN. By the same.
THE DOWER-HOUSE. By ANNIE THOMAS (Mrs. Pender Cudlip).
THE SAVAGE-CLUB PAPERS (1867). With all the Original
Illustrations. Also the Second Series, for 1868.
EVERY-DAY PAPERS. By ANDREW HALLIDAY.

May also be had, handsomely bound in cloth gilt, price 2s. 6d. each.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA



3 0112 055252230